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A Complete New Novel by **GEORGE BAGBY**

VOL. 3, NO. 4

MANHUNT

APRIL, 1955

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Blood Brothers

"We got to protect ourselves. We got to have a gang, some guys with guns and all . . . just to protect ourselves . . ."

A Novelette

BY HAL ELLSON

THE neighborhood's no good. It's not safe to walk the streets. Yeah, stay out of trouble, they tell you. And you're in it up to your neck. There's no way out. You're goofed before you start. But I don't care no more. Be like the rest, I say, but be slicker.

There's only one trouble with that. We ain't organized, and you got to be. You got to stick together, get a rep. Take the Royal

Hoods on Twelfth. They got a real mob, they're real rocks. Us?

We can't stop them when they come through, can't fight them, can't keep them away from the girls. Man, if they don't like you, you're dead with a capital D. I'd join up with them, if they'd let me, but they don't want nobody outside their own territory.

I guess you can't blame them. They got to stick together. But us? We're nothing. Just punks, and slicksters like Lubo. That's a mean cat. He was born evil. Making like he was my friend till he got that five dollars from me. Now he don't know I'm breathing. But I'm going to get me that money back.

It's dark now. I go to the window. People out, lights shining, lots of gay sound, like everybody in the world got money jingling in their pockets, going some place. Me, I'm broke. I need that money. Mr. Lubo, I'm going to get that money tonight, or else.

Yeah, I light a clincher and go to the door. Go downstairs, hit the street.

It's summer, everybody out. Going down the block, I don't look at nobody, don't see nothing. I got to find Lubo. Maybe he's hitting the jukebox at the corner.

I hear it playing before I reach there. It's real loud, cause the door is open. I move into the candy store. A few guys hanging around, a couple of girls. Two dancing in the back. A guy is leaning on the jukebox.

He turns. It ain't Lubo. Lubo ain't in sight.

The guy at the juke says, "Where you going, Speed?"

I look and see it's Gimpy. He's dark-skinned, darker than me. Got Spanish blood, and a bad leg. A weird cat with a bad temper. Cross him wrong and you got a blade in your heart.

He's smiling now, showing them white teeth. Handsome, but he's got that bad leg. "Where you going?" he says again.

"I got business," I tell him.

"Yeah?" His eyes light up. "What's her name? Is it somebody new, or the same old rag?"

He's still smiling and I know he's kidding, so I take it and tell him, "This is personal."

"Okay, Speed. See you later."

I leave. That jukebox goes dead, hits another tune seconds later. That's Gimpy again. He feeds that machine all day sometimes. Maybe cause he can't dance. Sometimes he watches the others, smiling, but I know he ain't enjoying himself. That's the way it is with him. Trust his smile and you be dead, but I know him.

I hit for the poolroom now. Lubo should be there. He spends half his life racking them balls and splitting them up.

There's a mob inside, guys leaning over the tables, guys watching. A guy at the door in a pink shirt, green tie. Pinkie.

Yeah, that's the stud that owns

the place. Got grey skin, yellow in his eyes. One eye don't look at you, the other does. You want to sell something, a watch, a ring, an overcoat, he buys it — at his price. You want to buy some reefers, he's got them. A pistol? He's got that too. You want an address, it's yours for the price. He's got everything but two heads.

I walk in, pass him. He gives me the eye, takes the cigar out of his mouth. I walk around. No Lubo. Can't even smell him.

I come back to the door. Pinkie sticks the cigar in his mouth, looks me over. "You want something?" he says.

"I'm looking for somebody."

"You going to shoot some pool?"

"No, man."

"Then keep walking."

I look at him. I guess he knows. Maybe he can see it in my face. He don't want trouble in his place.

2.

I walk out, look up and down the block. Lubo ain't around. I hit for the avenue, a movie-place two blocks up. That stud's got to be there, or no place.

A lot of cats hanging around under the marquee when I get there. They're mostly strange. A crap game going just inside the alley leading to the back of the movie-house.

I walk over. Nobody looks up. It's a hot game, everybody sweating for gold. Lubo not there. Nobody I know.

I move away, go back. Lubo must have seen me, I figure. That's the answer. Maybe he's in the poolroom, maybe he ducked in the back.

I play it cool this time. I cut across the street, come down the block and cross over. Pinkie's at the counter. That cigar half-chewed. He looks poison at me when I come to the door.

I don't pay him no mind. It's like he ain't there. I'm looking at the others. Lubo's not there. I feel like going back to the toilet. Maybe he's hiding, or blowing some weed.

"You see what you want?" Pinkie asks with a nasty voice.

I look at him, shake my head, look him in the eyes to show I ain't scared.

"Maybe you're looking for a busted head," he says, and then I see the cue-stick. It's sawed off, quarter-size, a mean weapon. I once saw him split a guy's head with that.

I like mine the way it is, so I leave fast and hit for home. No use seeing Ella without money. I'll wait on the stoop and maybe Lubo will show. I'll tag him for the money then, and he better pay up.

People are on the stoop, little kids playing around. No use sitting down in all that noise. Damn, I got to go to the roof for quiet, but maybe lovers is up there. I don't know.

I hit for the roof. Two flights up, I hear the front door close behind me, steps on the stairs. I pay no mind

and go on up all the way. The roof door is open. You can smell the night, fresh air moving down the last flight. A good smell.

I step out on the tar. Dark. Quiet. You don't see nothing at first, don't hear nothing. There's just the wind soft against my face, hardly moving, sweet-like. Little sounds start up, like bells tinkling, street-noises, horns, far-away voices. My eyes see now, see that sagging chimney over there. It looks like an old man stooping. Everything is shadow. Nobody up here but me. No lovers smooching.

Good. I want to be alone. I cross the roof, look down at the street. It ain't real. I'm still looking when I get the feeling. Somebody behind me but I don't hear nothing. It's just the feeling.

I turn fast. Somebody standing in the roof doorway. He's nothing but shadow. He don't move.

I step back from the edge of the roof. There's not much room to run and I feel like moving.

"Speed?"

"Yeah," I say, and I feel better now, cause I know that voice, know who it is. Lubo.

He steps out of the doorway, starts moving toward me. He's taking his time and I got that funny feeling again, like things ain't right. But I'm not scared of him. He don't ever do nothing 'less he's got somebody with him.

I stand and meet him. He stops, and I say, "You looking for me?"

"Not exactly. I heard you was looking for me."

"Who told you?"

"I got the word."

I figure I know who told but I don't say nothing to that. "Anyway, I was looking for you," I tell him. "But how'd you know I was up here?"

"I saw you hit the door downstairs."

"Yeah, but how did you know I was up here?"

"I knocked on your door. Nobody answered and I just naturally came on up."

I didn't like the way he said that, the way he was saying anything tonight. Something's wrong, I tell myself. Something's going to happen. I figured I was ready for him so I waited.

"So?" he says.

"So what?"

"You wanted to see me, boy. About what?"

I put it to him straight. "It's a matter of five bucks."

"Five dollars?"

"You don't remember?"

"I don't know nothing about that."

I couldn't answer. We stood there looking at each other and my skin is all tight, my breath is coming hard all of a sudden. Cause something is wrong, crazy. Lubo followed me here, I figure, and that don't make sense. Cause he ain't going to pay off, and he ain't got none of his boys with him.

Maybe he thinks I'm a punk, so I say, "Maybe you forgot, but I didn't. I want that money."

"You want to try taking it from me?"

"I'll take it, or take it out of your butt."

He laughed then. "Cool, man. Cool. I was only jiving to see what you do. You're an all-right stud. Give me five."

That means shake hands. He raised his hand like we do. I raised mine. We touch palms.

"Cool, man," he says.

Then bang! He raises his knee quick, gets me below the belt. I hit the deck. Next thing I see somebody else come through that door. That's all. Rockets go off in my head. Shoes is beating my brain and body. I try to cover, but they keep stomping. I can't cover everything. I feel a shoe against my cheekbone and the lights go out. Dark cliffs go sliding down inside my brain.

3.

"Speed!"

I hear a voice. It's far away and I don't know it. Somebody trying to wake me up and I don't ever want to wake up. Pain all over me.

"Speed!"

A hand shaking me. I feel it on my face, slapping me now.

"Speed, you all right?"

I know who it is now. Gimpy. I don't want to open my eyes but I got to, cause he won't go away.

I roll my head, look up. There's a shadow over me, a dark face. I can see the whites of his eyes, his teeth shining.

"I thought you were dead," Gimpy says. "You wouldn't wake."

"I'm half-dead," I tell him.

"Can you get up?"

I tried. Gimpy helped me sit up. My body ain't there. It's numb at first, then I feel where they kicked me. Pain is all over, but mostly in my face. I raise my hand. Got a lump like an egg on my cheekbone, the taste of blood in my mouth.

Gimpy struck a match and whistled. "They really got you."

"You sound like you know all about it."

"I heard," he said. "Lubo came in the candy store with Tuffy. They was blowing off. So I came up. What happened?"

"It was something about money. Lubo owed me. I wanted to collect."

"You collected."

"Yeah."

"I hate his guts."

"You, too?"

"He got money out of me. Gave me my name. I hate him most for that."

"What about the rest of us?"

Gimpy shrugged. "I don't care too much. It's a name, I guess. But Lubo . . . I'd like to stick him."

I felt my face again. The taste of blood was in my mouth, the smell of it in my nose. Blood from it in my mouth. I spat a thick glob out. The taste was there yet.

"They beat you real bad," Gimpy said. "Tomorrow you'll feel it."

"I know."

"You want to get up now?"

"Okay."

He took my arm. I didn't want him to, but once he got it, I couldn't say no.

"Better not go in yet," he said.

"Why not?"

"You're messed bad. Maybe your people won't like what they see."

"They're not home yet."

"No? You know what time it is?"

I didn't say, didn't ask. But it was late. I could tell now. Not much noise from the streets, no kids hollering down below. Just a horn now and then. A couple of winos arguing over a bottle.

"It's after midnight," Gimpy said. "Come on."

"Where to?"

"The candy store. You can wash up. Fix yourself."

We went down to the street. The candy store was still open, the owner sweeping up. He stopped the broom and stared.

"We're going in the back, Squeaks. Okay?" Gimpy said. "He's got to wash up."

Squeaks nodded, followed us to the back of the store. He had a room there, a sink, a stove, a busted bed.

"What happened?" Squeaks asked. "Who mowed you down?"

You don't answer questions like that in my neighborhood. I didn't say nothing. Gimpy asked for a towel.

Squeaks got it and came back. He had a piece of ice wrapped in it. He wet another towel and went to wipe my face. Gimpy grabbed the towel.

"I'll do it," he said, and he took over. My face felt raw, but he worked the towel easy. He wasn't smiling now. He was cursing soft in Spanish.

Squeaks went out front, and Gimpy pressed the ice against my cheekbone.

"You want a cigarette?" he said.

I took one. He lit it for me. When I finished the smoke we went out front and I looked at myself in the mirror. Yeah, I didn't know myself.

"Somebody really stomped you," Squeaks said.

"You think he don't know?" Gimpy said. "Let him alone."

He asked me if I wanted a drink then, and we each had a coke.

4.

Ten minutes later we moved along. Gimpy walked me to the stoop. I looked up at the windows. No lights, but that don't mean nothing. Moms might be waiting in the back, Pops ready with the strap.

We sat on the stoop and lit up. I could feel Gimpy watching me, see them dark eyes shining when I turned to him. I know he wants to say something and he can't. Finally I ask him.

"What about Ella?" he says.

"What about her?"

"How much do you like her?"

"You don't know?"

"I figured maybe the situation wasn't the same."

"It always is with me."

"Then I got news for you. It isn't with her."

"What are you telling?"

Gimpy sucked on his cigarette, looked away, then back at me, frowning. "I don't like to say this, Speed," he said. "If it was somebody else, I'd leave it buried, but you, I figured you ought to know."

"Go ahead, say it."

"You're going to blow your top."

"Say it anyhow."

"Okay, I saw Ella tonight. She was in here with Lubo."

"You mean she was here and he came in."

"There's more. She was talking to him. Then they went outside. He walked her home. They went up on her roof."

"How do you know so much if you was in here?" I asked, cause I didn't want to believe him.

"I followed them when they left."

"Up to the roof?"

"I went up on the next roof. You want to hear the rest?"

"No."

"You don't mind what I told you?"

"No. It's all right."

"You can't trust any girl. They're all alike. Turn your back and they got somebody else on the hook."

"It's got to do with Lubo," I said. "I guess he told her what happened tonight."

"That still don't give her the right to go up on the roof with him."

"Maybe she was scared."

"Then you're going to see her?"

"I'm going to straighten her out."

Gimpy shook his head, shot his butt away. "Remember Spats? Lubo took his girl away and that was the end."

I got up. A squad car turned the corner, cruised slow down the block. The bulls looked at us, went on, turned the next corner.

"I don't even hate them as much as I hate Lubo," Gimpy said.

He was facing me now, eyes shining, like he's ready to smile. He don't, but his hand moves and I see the knife. "This is waiting for Lubo," he says. "I'm saving it up, keeping it sharp."

He ain't jiving. If he ever gets the chance, he'll use it. But Lubo don't fool with him no more, don't turn his back.

"I'm going up," I say. "Put it away."

Gimpy is smiling now. He tucks the knife, looks at me. "You know, I'm your pal," he says. "Me and you should stick together. We can do things, watch out for each other."

He had his hand out now. I took it.

"We could be like brothers," he says. "Know what I mean?"

I shook my head. It was time to go. "See you," I said.

"Cool, man." He smiled again, turned and went limping off whis-

tling to himself like nobody's sleeping.

A funny guy. But all right. I remembered how he took the towel away from Squeaks, the way he washed my face. Like I really was his brother.

Going upstairs I thought about that. I never had no brother, big or small. Nobody to stick up for me in the streets.

I hit the last landing. Everything is quiet. Yeah, Moms is waiting behind the door with a baseball bat. I move to it and listen. No sound. I ease the key in the lock, open the door.

Light's on, nobody in the kitchen. I think I'm safe. Like hell I am. Moms comes flying into the kitchen, sees my face and starts screeching.

Pops is up now. Got the strap in his hand. His eyes is red. I've been fighting again. That's what he figures. I can't tell him different. I don't even try. I'm watching that belt. A lot of good it does. He let me have it, across the legs, across the back. All the way to my room till I slammed the door in his face.

5.

Yellow light in the room. I know it's morning, late. No sound. Pops and Moms gone to work.

I get up, squinting. The light hurts. My body feels all busted up. I look at myself. Nothing but bruises. That lump on my face is almost down, but I can't touch it.

No sense eating. I can't chew. I drink some milk, dress and go in the living room, look at the record-player. I'm not in the mood.

Too hot in the house. I go down the stairs. Gimpy is on the stoop.

"Hey, man, how you feeling?" he says.

"Bad. Real bad."

"Yeah, they done a real job."

I sat down. Gimpy handed me a smoke, lit it for me.

"I've been waiting here all morning," he said. "I didn't think you were coming down."

"Why didn't you call?"

"Cause you needed the sleep." He looked at me and smiled. "You got any plans?"

"About what?"

"Lubo. You can't take that laying down."

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't thought about it yet."

"I know. You're not in shape. But you're going to even the score."

"Yeah," I said, but I didn't know how. I wasn't too anxious to tangle with Lubo.

I guess Gimpy knew that. "The idea is to work on him the same way," he said. "You can't beat him in a fair one, and he don't deserve the chance."

"Got any ideas?"

"I been working on something. I'll let you know."

"Good. You want to get a drink?"

"Yeah, let's go."

We moved down to the candy store, sat at the counter and ordered

cokes. Gimpy paid for them. We had two more. He paid for them, too. When I kicked he said, "We're friends, ain't we?"

What could I say?

He hit the jukebox then. A nice record is playing. Gimpy is bugging the music, then I see the smile go off his face.

I look around.

Ella.

She sees me, and then it's like I ain't there. A second later she turns on her heels and walks out.

"Let her go," Gimpy says.

But I ain't listening to him. I run out after her, catch up to her. She won't look at me, won't turn, won't say nothing.

When we reach her stoop, she runs up the steps. I wanted to let her go. Something stopped me. I ran up the steps, caught her in the vestibule, swung her around.

She turned away. I'm mad now, ready to slap her. "You going to talk?" I say. "Or do I have to rip your tongue out?"

That done no good. She comes back with crazy talk.

"Do anything you want to me," she says.

I raised my hand, ready to slap her. She don't blink an eye. Maybe if she talked back I'd have busted her down.

"What's wrong with you?" I say. "You got to explain."

"We're quits, that's all."

"Why?"

"It's just that way."

" 'Less you say why, it ain't."

Suddenly she makes a break, but I grab her, slam her against the wall.

"I know why," I tell her. "Maybe you think I don't."

Somebody's on the stairs now. I hear footsteps coming down. I let her go. The door opens. Ella busts loose. I can't do nothing. A fat slob in a greasy black dress looks at me. Ella is on the stairs, running. No sense going after her now.

That fat lady looks at me. "Sonny boy, you better run along," she says.

"Don't sonny boy me, fat-stuff," I tell her, and she swings her pocketbook. It don't do no good, cause I ducked and busted out of there fast.

6.

I didn't get to see Ella till the next night. She went to the movies with friends. I waited outside and followed her. There's an alley round the corner from her house. I caught her when she reached there. She started to fight. I rapped her in the mouth and shoved her into the alley.

Next thing she's crying. I'm feeling kind of sorry for her and I try to give her my hankie. She threw it down.

I waited, let her quiet. She kept her hands over her face and wouldn't look up. "I got all night," I say, "all year. You don't leave till you start talking, till you explain."

That don't do no good. I figure the soft stuff won't work, so I grab her hair, get a handful and warn her.

Damn. She starts crying again. When she stops, I say, "All right, I know all about it."

She looked up at me then, touching her hair. "Know all about what?"

"The other night, innocent."

She looked scared now.

"You was on the roof with Lubo."

No answer. She don't say anything, just stares.

"Yeah, you can't answer that," I say. "Cause it's the truth. You figured I didn't know."

I could have belted her. I wanted to, but she's melted. She moved against me, put her head on my shoulder.

"It's not like what you think," she says.

"I ain't thinking. I know. You trying to tell me you wasn't there?"

"No, I was, but he made me go."

"Yeah, he carried you on his back. But I happen to know you walked with him just like nothing. I got friends to see."

She looked away then, didn't say nothing. I see a tear coming down her face, feel like kissing it away. I don't. That's kid stuff if I do. And maybe she's putting on the act, trying to soften me up cause I got her in the corner.

"Yeah, you see," I say, "I know the score."

"Yeah, you don't know nothing," she says.

"I don't know nothing?"

"Right. You hear, but you're deaf, you see, but you're blind."

"You mean to try to jive out of it, say you wasn't on no roof?"

"It ain't like you think."

"I told you already, I ain't thinking. I know. You're no good, is what I know."

She got her mouth open now, cause that hurt. I don't care. I feel like busting her lips open, knocking them lies back down her throat.

"All right," she says, "I'll tell you. I wasn't supposed to."

"Yeah!"

"You don't want to listen, Speed?"

"Go ahead, make up stuff. Make it up good."

"He made me go with him. He told me not to tell you."

"Hell, girl, you walked nice as you please. You was seen by a friend of mine in the candy store."

"Yeah, I walked cause I was scared."

"Of what?"

"He had a knife."

I laughed. "Good story. You see that knife?"

"Not till he walked me home. Now you know why I went up on the roof."

Damn, I wanted to punch the wall, kill that jiving Lubo. It'd be easy to see his blood in the gutter. But that Lubo's a mean cat, he keeps waiting, watching.

I don't know what to say to Ella. It's kind of late. I don't feel so good.

"Come on," I say, "I'll walk you home."

She ain't moving. I take her arm and she pulls it away.

"Not with you," she says.

"Why not? Something wrong with me?"

"He might see me."

"Who, Lubo? So what?"

"He told me to keep away from you. Not to say nothing about what happened. I ain't supposed to talk to you no more."

"Yeah, who he think he is? He can't tell you nothing."

"He can. I'm scared. Scared of that knife. Let me be by myself. Suppose I meet him, suppose he sees me?"

"With me, he ain't going to touch you." I grabbed her wrist. "Come on."

She pulled away again, and I see she's real scared. That Lubo really worked on her.

"Look," I tell her, "you're with me. We just walk home easy-like."

She raises her head again. Now she got a funny look in her eyes. "You going to protect me?" she says.

"Who else you think is?"

I see her think that over quick, like she's adding up things that I don't know about. Then she looks out the alley, looks down the block. It's kind of late, nobody around.

She gives me that look again, but like she's kind of doubtful. Then we move out of the alley, go down the street. I try to take her arm. She won't have that. I touch it and it feels stiff. I see she's scared, looking ahead, looking every place. She won't talk. She walks fast, like she's going to bust out in a run. Damn, she really is scared.

We hit her stoop and she runs up, slams the door. I got to grab her to stop her from going on up. I back her against the wall of the vestibule and she tries to shove away.

"Be calm," I say. "Nothing happened."

"Yeah, cause he wasn't around."

I see how hard she's breathing. Her dress is like to bust open, lips is open. I like them lips, that look in her eyes like she's a scared rabbit. I try to kiss her.

"Don't!"

She shove my face away. I see it ain't going to be like other nights. Unless I try harder. Give her arm a twist. Yeah.

I try, get her arm. Damn, this time she fights like a wildcat, kicks my sore leg. That done it. I seen stars and let go. Next thing I got her arm up behind her back. I'm ready to cripple her when she gives. She's a lump against me now, all soft, but I don't let go that arm. I keep pressure on, bring her chin up, her lips. Nice lips. I make them softer, feel her relax-like.

Soon it's all right. I know that when I feel her move against me. It's like old times, I think. That Lubo don't exist, don't breathe no more.

It's safe now. I let her arm go. "That's better," I say. "You all right now."

"Maybe."

"How maybe?"

She looks up. Got that funny look in her eyes again. I don't like it. She's thinking things.

"Let it loose," I tell her. "Say what you want to say."

"What's there to say?"

"That you ain't scared no more."

She shrugged. "I can't say. How do I know?"

"You talk crazy. How do you know what? What's that mean?"

"If you're going to protect me."

"Didn't I walk you home?"

"Yeah. You think that's all?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what are you going to do about it? Suppose I keep going with you, what about Lubo? He ain't going to sit still and just watch."

I figured that myself. So I'm watching her now and she's smiling that funny way again, like she's got me on the spot. She puts her hands up and pushes me away a bit, opens her pocketbook, takes out a cigarette, don't ask me to light it. She lights it herself and snorts smoke.

"Well," she says, "if you want to go with me, you got to do something."

"Got any suggestions?" I say.

"If you don't know what to do, I feel kind of sorry for you. I guess what he said was true."

"What did he say?"

"He says he beat you flat and you didn't do nothing. You went down and wouldn't fight."

"Yeah, that's a lie. He kicked me in the belly to start it. Tuffy was there to help finish me off."

"I wouldn't know about that. All I know is that if you want to go with me, you got to fight for me. That's what he did."

I didn't like that, didn't like the look on her face, either. She wasn't like this before. That's cause he got to her, got that evil inside her. But I don't want to quit. I want to bust her in the mouth and I want to keep her yet, even if it's only cause of Lubo. So I say, "What do you expect me to do?"

"Do anything," she says. "I don't care. If you win, you can have me. If you don't, don't expect me to see you no more, cause I ain't. I know what's good for me."

She drops her butt and steps on it. I'm looking at her. She can see I'm burning, she wants me to burn. Yeah, like a floozie she smiles.

"I got to go up, boy friend," she says. "You don't mind?"

"Go ahead," I say. "Go on up."

She leaned forward, stuck her face out, lips. I see them pouting and I want to bust them again and I don't. I kiss her.

She opens the door, turns back. "Lubo got a switch-blade," she says. "That ought to give you an idea."

I just look at her and don't say nothing. She smiles at me like a cat. The door closes.

I hit for the candy store then, mad as a burned cat.

7.

Coming down the street, I can hear that jukebox from the corner.

Hear it thumping. I reach the store, go past. The record slides away. Another comes on and I stop. Maybe Gimpy is there. Maybe Lubo. I don't want to tangle with him the way I am.

I go in anyhow. No Lubo. Just some of the usual crowd. Gimpy's there, too. Got his back against the juke, smoking a cigarette and watching them dance. He's got a smile on his face, teeth showing.

I come up. He turns. "Hey, man, where you been?" he says.

"Around," I say. That's all. I'm in no mood.

He sees that. "What's wrong?" he says.

"Everything."

"Couldn't be you saw Ella?"

"I saw her."

"You straighten her?"

I didn't want to talk about it. I'm watching Gimpy. It's like he's not particularly interested. Got his eye on one of the girls. She's too fat, but maybe he likes her. He ain't got much choice.

When I don't answer, he lets everything slide, turns. "That Cora is all right," he says. "She can dance."

"Yeah, she can dance."

"You think if I asked her, she'd dance with me?"

"I don't know," I say, cause I'm not interested.

He's looking at her again. I go to the counter for a drink. He follows after me but he's still got one eye on that Cora.

"You didn't say about Ella."

"Forget it," I tell him.

"Okay, man." He says that like it ain't nothing. His mind is elsewhere, I see. He's all excited, eyes shining. "Order me an orange drink," he tells me. "I'll be with you."

The record was going off. He limped quick to the machine, dropped another coin. That box started thudding again. Cora ain't dancing now. Gimpy starts toward her.

"How about a dance?" he says to her, and he's still smiling, waiting.

That fat slob Cora looks at him like suddenly she's made out of pure gold.

"You expect me to dance with a cripple?" she says.

Everybody heard. Nobody's talking now. You can't hear nothing but the record. And Gimpy ain't smiling no more. Just his teeth is showing, like he's trying to make out them words didn't hurt. Putting on the act, but I see his fists. He's got them balled up, ready to swing out. I'm hoping he knocks her teeth out.

He don't. He shoves his fists in his pockets. Cora lights a cigarette and everybody's talking again like nothing happened. Gimpy backed away. He comes toward me. His face is red.

"You hear that?" he says, smiling.

"Why didn't you bust her?" I tell him.

"It don't matter. You think that hurt?"

It did, no matter what he said.

Gimpy picked up the bottle of

orange, drank some, put it down. "You said you saw Ella. So what happened? You don't look so happy."

I told him why she went with Lubo to the roof, told him about the switch-blade.

"You believe that?" he asks.

"It's his style."

"So what you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe I ought to drop her."

"And let him have her?"

"I don't know if it's worth it. Hell, you know what she said. If you want me, you got to fight for me."

"Man, she's big stuff now. That Lubo put ideas in her head. She wants to stand on the sidelines and see blood. Maybe yours. Maybe you better forget her."

"You think so?" I say, and I look at him. He looks at me, then he smiles, shakes his head. He wanted to see what I thought, how I felt.

"Let him take her and he'll take everything. You won't live it down."

Yeah, he's right. I'm not thinking of Ella no more. She's no good. I got to settle with Lubo. But how? I ask Gimpy.

"He ought to be dead," Gimpy says. "I'm all for it. He owes my cousin Raymond too."

"He owes everybody."

"My cousin is kind of crazy-like."

"So?"

"I could talk to him. That Lubo's real scared of Raymond. Maybe we could put him on Lubo. When he's right, he'll do anything. You want to be in on it?"

I nodded. I don't know what's going to happen, but anything's all right long as Lubo is taken care of.

"Where do we find Raymond?" I say.

"I'm going to see him tonight, or in the morning. I'll let you know."

"Good stuff."

Gimpy finishes his orange drink. "There's like three of us now," he said. "You, me and Raymond."

"Yeah," I say. It feels kind of good, but I'm wondering about Raymond. He's a real gone stud. You don't know what he'll do next.

8.

Next morning I'm sleeping. Somebody knocks on the door. I don't feel like getting up. I close my eyes. That knocking continues, but I'm like dreaming now, hearing voices, somebody laughing.

Bam! A fist hits the door and I'm out of bed in a second. I go to the door.

"Who's that?" I say.

"Open up before I kick that goddam door down."

I go for a broom handle, then I hear somebody laugh. It's Gimpy. I open the door. Gimpy and Raymond is standing there.

"Yeah, he thought it was the Law," Raymond says, and they both laugh. There's a funny look on their faces. They come in and I see their eyes. They kind of small.

"Man, you look kind of high," I say.

"Who, me? I don't touch that wild grass," Gimpy says.

I know he's lying. Raymond laughs. He's real weird. A skinny cat. Looks like he can't do nothing, but nobody plays with him. He's real wild.

I dress fast, come into the living room. They got the record-player spinning. Gimpy's eyes is half-closed. He looks naturally satisfied. Raymond's dancing by himself.

He stops. Gimpy opens his eyes wider, looks at me. It's like he's playing he's high. He talks to Raymond and Raymond stops dancing. Gimpy winks at me.

"What's this I hear?" Raymond says to me, and Gimpy cuts in. He tells him everything about the beating, about Ella.

"You didn't do nothing?" Raymond says.

"He's got his boys," Gimpy tells him.

"So what?"

"Don't he owe you money?" Gimpy says.

"Yeah."

"You going to collect?"

"I'm ready right now."

Gimpy winks at me and says, "We can all collect."

"I'm ready right now."

That did it. We got up, went down to the street and started looking for Lubo. He's sitting on his stoop, none of his boys with him. Right off he knows something is wrong but he tries to play it cool. He don't move an eyelash.

Raymond is first up the stoop. Me and Gimpy is on his tail.

"Looking for somebody?" Lubo asks, just like nothing is happening.

"Yeah, I'm looking for you. Looking for money you owe me for a long time."

Lubo blows smoke. He's still trying to play it cool. "Man," he says, "drop dead. Get your money from somebody else."

Just like that he says it. I got to admit he's playing it real cool, but he don't know. Next second Raymond is all over him. We pull him off.

"Give him a chance," Gimpy says. "Anyway, this ain't the place."

I look at Lubo. He's not cool now. Maybe he thought Raymond was kidding.

"All right, where's the money?" Raymond says.

"I haven't got it."

"You going to get it?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Later."

"Later ain't no good. One hour from now is all you get. You don't show with it and we're coming looking for you. That'll be bad."

"One hour?"

"No more."

"I'll have to dig around."

"Yeah."

That was all. Me and Gimpy still had hold of Raymond. We pulled him away, went down the block. That boy was crazy-wild.

We didn't bother going back in an hour. It was too early to do anything in case he didn't cough up. In the afternoon I'm in the candy store and I hear Lubo's been around, asking for money. He's got a lot to borrow, not too many friends to help.

9.

I meet Gimpy and Raymond that night. We go down to the corner, hang around, keep our eyes out. Then we swing through the neighborhood, looking for Lubo. He ain't no place.

Nine o'clock we're back on the corner. It's kind of quiet. We figure we're not going to see Lubo when he walks out of the candy store and comes over to us.

"You got the money?" Raymond says right off.

"Here," Lubo says.

Only one trouble, he ain't got it all when Raymond counts.

"Where's the rest?" he asks.

"Couldn't get it. You'll have to wait for that."

"I waited too long already."

"What do you want me to do, squeeze the rest out of a lemon?"

That's the tip-off. Raymond flipped his top. Yeah, he moved so fast I didn't see nothing but Lubo flying. He hits the sidewalk and Raymond is all over him, stomping his brains in. I got no pity for him, but that Raymond's going wild. Me and Gimpy grab him, pull him away.

He's like crazy. He's yelling he's going to kill Lubo. A crowd's gathering. Cops'll be on the scene. Lubo is bleeding at the mouth. He says something about a gun. He's going to kill Raymond. We hold Raymond tight.

Sirens sound. Next thing we're flying. We clear the scene, get away, hide down a cellar.

A half hour later we come out. The street is quiet again. We go to my stoop and sit. Raymond is still excited, talking loud, talking about a gun. Gimpy tries to quiet him and can't.

"You hear what Lubo said," Raymond tells him. "He's going to shoot me. Yeah, but I'll get him first."

He's still talking when a girl comes along. He watches. She smiles. That's all. He's after her like a bloodhound on the trail.

I watch him go, then say, "That boy is real gone."

"I told you that," Gimpy says.

"You think he meant that?"

"What?"

"About getting Lubo?"

"He's crazy enough to do anything."

"Does he own a piece?"

"There's always a way to borrow a pistol."

We smoked another cigarette. Then my mother called. I couldn't duck away. "Okay, I'm coming up," I say.

Gimpy stood up. We shook hands. "You see how it is when guys stick together?" he said. "You can do things, like fixing Mr. Lubo."

I nod, tell him I'll see him, cause Moms is calling again. He goes down the block, I go up the stairs. I'm thinking of him all the way up, what he said. Something's wrong. Seems like nothing's fixed yet. Something's going to happen. I feel it in my bones.

Moms is in the kitchen when I come in. "Who's the boy I saw downstairs?" she asks right off.

"A friend of mine," I tell her, and she looks at me funny, like she's wondering things. She don't trust my friends, none of them. She don't want them in the house unless they're made of gold, and nobody is in this neighborhood.

"What's his name?" she says.

"Gimpy."

I see her frown. She don't get it, so I tell her he's a cripple, he walks with a limp and that's why they call him that.

"Oh," she says, and I can see she feels sorry for him. That leg makes him extra special, like he's an altar boy with wings. Me, I know different. That boy would steal the altar if he got the chance.

10.

Next day is bad. Sun's gone and the streets is wet. Rain in the morning. It stops but don't clear up. There's like mud in the sky.

Later, it starts to rain again. It keeps coming down. I stay around the house and play records.

One o'clock I hear thumping on the stairs. Somebody knocks on the door. I open. It's Raymond and Gimpy. They both look weird, like their faces is changed.

They move in. Raymond's skin is grey. Gimpy looks excited. Got a queer smile that ain't real.

"What's happening?" I say.

"I got the gun," Raymond says, and I feel a big fist squeeze my guts. Last night I didn't believe him. I look at Gimpy and he nods.

"You ready?" Raymond says.

"For what?"

"Man, don't hand me that. You know what I'm talking about. You chickening out?"

It's too late now. I'm in on it. Can't get out. I nod. That's all. We go out, down the stairs. Gimpy looks at me. He's so excited his eyes is popping out of his head.

We hit the street. It's raining but that don't matter. We walk like the sun is shining. I can hear the rain falling soft, making a sad sound. It starts to come down harder. We don't move any faster. The gutter is flooded, trash floating down the curbs. I feel nervous. I know Raymond ain't playing, know he's going to kill Lubo and I'm scared for myself. Maybe I'll be blamed. Otherwise I don't care. I felt like I wanted to kick Lubo in the face.

We reach the candy store, move in. A couple of guys there, one girl. The jukebox playing *When The Rain Was Falling*. That music sounded weird.

I take a deep breath cause I don't

see Lubo. Then somebody steps from a phone booth in the back. Got a patch on his face. Lubo.

It's kind of dark in the store. He's coming toward us. I look at Raymond. His face is all twisted up.

Next thing he's got the gun out. I knew this was going to happen. Nobody tries to stop him. The others think he's playing. I know he isn't, I know him better.

Lubo sees him and stops. Nobody says anything. That music is like soft now, and I think I can hear the sound of the rain again, a sad sound, falling slow, then real fast like the whole sky is crashing down.

Raymond fires. There's two shots. I hear a scream and we all scatter. I bust out of the store. The street is empty. I feel like I'm alone and I can't breathe. My lungs is busting.

I hit a doorway, duck in a vestibule. I'm shaking like a leaf. I hear my heart beating, hear the rain, then sounds in the house. I thought the cops was behind me.

I can't stay there. I run through the hall and into the yard, scale three fences. I rip my hand on the last fence. That puts sense in my head. I go in another house, fix my hand, walk through the hall and out the front, like I'm walking out of a friend's house.

There's a crowd around the candy store, two squad cars, another moving fast up the street. I cross over. The cops is shoving back the crowd. I hang around. Somebody leans against me. I look and it's Gimpy. His eyes is wide open. He's scared as I am.

We wait around. No sign of Raymond. He got away. One cop is searching the street. He finds the gun under a car and brings it back.

We walk away, go home to wait. Maybe the cops will come, pick us up. I didn't sleep that night.

Next morning Gimpy called early. "They got Raymond," he says.

I felt my guts go into knots. "When?" I ask him.

"Last night. Somebody squealed."

"What about us?"

"We're safe."

"Yeah, maybe."

"They'd have picked us up already if they knew."

"Maybe Raymond will talk, say we was with him."

Gimpy shook his head. "Not him. I know my cousin."

He was right. The cops didn't come. Raymond didn't talk. He was put on ice.

After that, we let things cool for a while, don't get in any trouble. We see a lot of each other now. Sometimes we'd go to the pool, sometimes to the river. Gimpy don't swim. He don't want to show that bad leg.

Nights we'd be in the candy store. Gimpy plays the juke. Man, he pours money into it, keeps it hot just to watch them girls dancing, especially Cora. And all the time he's got that big smile on his face like he's enjoying himself when I know he ain't.

We never mention Lubo. It's like

that shooting never happened. Then one night Gimpy walks me home. We sit on the stoop, not saying nothing.

Then he says, "You see how we settled that business with Lubo?"

"How do you mean?" I say.

"Well, one of us alone was nothing. Two of us, we're strong. Three of us and the issue was settled."

"There's only two of us now," I remind him.

"And it's like we're brothers. We're together, ain't we? We can help each other out, stick together."

I nod.

"Suppose there's more of us? I mean regular guys, nobody crazy like Raymond? The more of us, the stronger we are."

"That's an idea," I say.

"Nobody can touch us, see?"

"I see what you mean."

Gimpy stands up then. He's smiling. "Think about it," he says, and he walks back toward the candy store where that wild jukebox is still playing. I wait till he goes in the store, then I run up the stairs.

II.

Next day it's all through the neighborhood, everybody talking about it. A lot of crazy stories I hear. All I know that's true is that Cora got stabbed. She's in the hospital. Going home last night she passed that alley up the street and somebody mugged and cut her up, messed her face real bad.

The funny thing is Gimpy don't show that morning, and every morning he's been coming round to the house. I don't see him in the afternoon, either. Don't see him till evening.

When I come down, he's sitting on the stoop and got a funny look on his face. He don't greet me like usual.

"You sick?" I say.

"No, man."

He says that without looking at me.

"You wasn't around today."

"I visited my aunt."

I let that pass, sit down, light up and say, "You hear about Cora?"

"Yeah, I heard."

It's like he ain't interested. So we don't say no more about it. He's still got that funny look and I'm wondering. We go to the candy store for a drink. The juke is playing. For the first time, I don't see him feed it. He don't even look at it, don't look at the dancers. Maybe nobody else notices, but I do. Nobody's thinking about Gimpy and that cutting job on Cora. He's a cripple, they figure, but they don't know what's inside him and how fast he can move when he really wants to.

We have our drinks, go outside, don't say anything. I see he's uneasy, not himself. He can't look at me.

"You know, don't you?" he finally says.

I play innocent. "Know what?" I answer.

"You know who did that cutting."

He's looking straight at me now. "It figures," I tell him.

"Yeah, I couldn't forget what she said that time when I asked her to dance. That's why I did it."

"I guess she won't say nothing like that again," I say, and we walk back to my stoop.

12.

Ella ain't been around since that last talk we had about Lubo. I hear she's visiting an aunt in Virginia. Hell, I don't care if she never comes back.

But she does. I guess the girls gave her the news about Lubo. I know that soon as I see her.

She's soft like a kitten now, like I can tie a red bow around her neck. She never been like this before, but I don't appreciate it. It's cause she's scared.

When she sees it ain't working, she says, "What's wrong, Speed? You mad at me for something?"

"You know what's wrong," I tell her. "Next time you fool around you be dead. Talk like you did and I'll beat you blue."

She knows what I mean and stays shut on that. She puts on another act. "You're so different," she tells me.

"Yeah, I am, and so are you," I say. Cause I do feel different. I'm not the same guy, she ain't the same girl. We've both changed. I can't explain why, but everything's different. I don't want to think about it and I turn to go.

Ella grabs my arm. "You going to see me tonight?" she asks.

I cool it, freeze her. "No, you going to see me. I'll be at the candy store about nine. You better be there."

I walk away, leave her there looking kind of scared.

13.

I don't show at the candy store till nine-thirty. Ella is waiting. She gives me a big smile, like making her wait is a Christmas present.

"Let's walk," I say.

"Where?"

"You going to ask questions?"

She didn't ask no more. We walked out of the candy store, started for her house. Neither of us is saying anything now. I guess she's wondering what's on my mind. Yeah, it's been on my mind all day. I been waiting for this.

We reach her door. She looks at me puzzled.

"Now what?" she says.

"It's cooler up on the roof. We're going up."

She's scared a little, but she don't say nothing. She just nods. We go up.

In the hall she gets a little balky and I tell her, "You went up with somebody else, you can go with me."

We went on up the rest of the way. It's real dark on the roof.

Later, I get up, light a cigarette

and move toward the roof door.

"Speed, where are you going?" she says.

"Be right back. Wait there."

I reach the roof door. Gimpy is standing back in the shadow of the landing. I step inside and say, "It's all yours."

"Cool, man."

I see his eyes shining in the dark. We glide palms. He steps out on the roof and moves toward Ella.

I went down the stairs.

14.

Next day I meet Gimpy. It's like he owes me his life now. We talk about last night, then he brings up the other stuff about how we're like brothers but we should really organize and do big things.

That's how it started. First thing you know, he's making plans, how we can make a club, who we can use and who we can't, all the things we can do with a real clique.

He pulls that knife then that he always carries, opens it.

"What you going to do with that?" I say.

"All of us will be like brothers. Everybody that comes in the club will have to do the same."

"The same what?"

"Exchange blood."

He pulled up his sleeve, cut himself on the arm, a neat slit. Then he handed the knife to me. I did the same, drew blood. We rubbed our blood together.

That was it. It was nothing getting the others. Guys was asking to come into the club. We took only the best. No funky turkies was allowed to join. Yeah, in no time at all we had a real mob. We're scared of nobody. The neighborhood is ours.

Saturday night there's a dance in the neighborhood. It's early yet. We're all standing on the corner, waiting around. It used to be them Crazy Hoods on Twelfth Street would come through, bust into the dance, take all the girls, mess us up if we look at them cockeye.

Yeah, tonight they got a surprise. Eight-thirty the first Hoods come down the block like they own it. There's two of them. They walk at us like they going to sweep us off the sidewalk.

That's how much they know. They reach us and we drift and spread like we're scared. We got a circle around them before they know what's happening. They stop, look at us now, kind of scared.

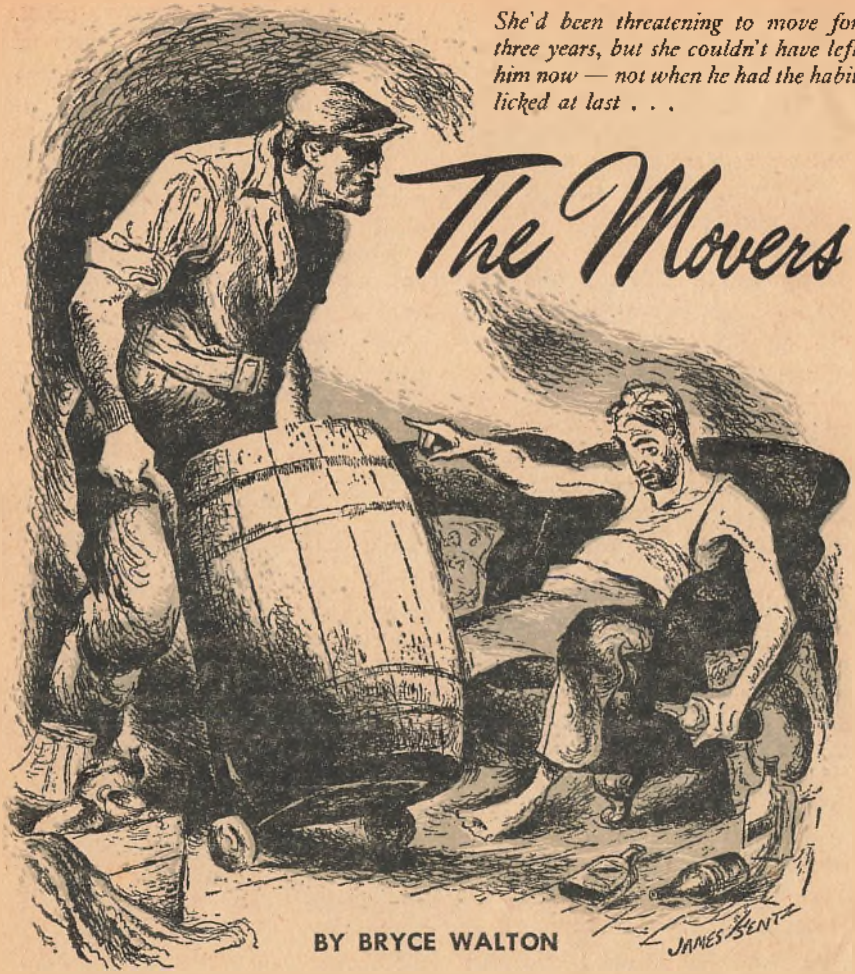
That's when I give the signal. Next thing, everybody's moving. The Hoods try to bust away, but belt-buckles is flying, cutting skin, fists doing good work, boots stomping. Then two go down, stomped into the pavement.

It's over in no time. They're laying there like they're dying.

Next day word comes through. The Hoods is going to have it out with us. Yeah, we say, let them. We're ready for anything now.

She'd been threatening to move for three years, but she couldn't have left him now — not when he had the habit licked at last . . .

The Movers



BY BRYCE WALTON

He never knew he was on another bender until he started out of it. And then there was always this same dream. He was inside a big brown bottle crawling up the side, slipping down a little, crawling and crawling, and he was slipping down and then Susie reached down into the bottle and scraped him out like a fly.

Only this time there was no Susie, and there was a crack in the side of the bottle and an icy wind came through and plucked at his face.

"Susie!" he whispered, and opened his eyes. His hand raked along the floor in back of the couch and he felt the clatter of empty bottles echoing like tolling bells through the empty raw holes of his body.

The window was open about an inch at the bottom. An icy wind sighed through. Big snowflakes whispered on the dirty naked window pane, and outside everything was buried and still under white snow.

Susie, how long this time? *How long, Susie?* Why did you leave the window open like this? I might have died, caught pneumonia or something. So what? How long had he been crawling in the bottle this time? What had happened? He never remembered what happened, and when people told him, he never really believed them.

He closed the window, then crawled off the sour-smelling blankets and raked at the phone. His hand was shaking so that he almost dropped the receiver. He dialed. Meridian 7-1212. More frightening even than not knowing what he had done on a jag, was not knowing how long he'd been buried without being really dead. Time lost. Time wasted. The slow pickling in alcohol . . . all this ability, this talent, this selling genius slowly getting pickled.

He listened desperately. "At the tone the time will be four-twenty-three and thirty seconds."

"I don't care what time it is! I mean, what day — what —"

He dropped the receiver and slid back into the blankets. Who did you call to find out what day it was, or month, or year? *The New York Times?* They'd think he was nuts. Nobody calls to find out what month it is!

He felt of the beard over his face and scratched at the scaly skin. About a week's growth that was all. Just a week this time. He could always tell by the beard. He never shaved during a toot, not after damn near cutting his own throat that time. Susie — where the hell are you, baby? Why'd you let me lie here with that winter wind blowing in on me? How come winter comes in a week these days?

What have I done this time, baby? Hit some poor slob I didn't even know? Told off the landlady again, or Lewis, or your sister-in-law? He fumbled down behind the couch and watched empty bottle after empty bottle rolling like so many empty years all over the bare floor. He started to shake all over and his teeth were clattering.

He ran across the living room to the bedroom, then into the bathroom, and then he looked in all the closets, and in the kitchen. Not a drop, not a damn drop anywhere!

He stumbled back to the couch. He wore only a damp dirty pair of slacks, no shirt, no socks, no shoes. His skin felt slimy and itchy. Now it was too hot in here to live. He could hear the spasming of steam in the radiator.

He saw the paper peeping under the door. He crawled over to it and read the letters scrawled with the soft-leaded pencil. "Mr. Martin, you raise more hell, I call cops!"

Go on you old biddy, call the cops, call everybody, who cares any more?

Susie, she would care! She always cared. He crawled back to the couch and propped himself up on the edge of it, like a rock precariously balanced on the side of a hill. "Susie!"

Fear crawled in his belly. It was a panic washing over him, itching and sweating.

"*Susie!*"

He could feel the tears on his cheeks and he lay there sniffling. Where are you, baby?

"*I'm going to leave this time for sure,*" she'd said. "*I don't want to go, Hiney, but I can't stand it any more! It's been too many years and I'm tired.*"

"Don't say that, baby! You know I need you now — this is when I need you!"

"*I can't help it, Hiney.*"

"Don't cry, baby!"

"*I'm tired, I'm sick I'm so tired. I can't do anything now.*"

"Sure you can, baby. Just stick with me. I'll pull out of it!"

"*You've said it every time. It just gets worse.*"

"But this is it! We made it once. Remember Miami in '43, baby? We'll make it again! But you've got to help me now. Now unpack that stuff, please unpack that stuff!"

"*I'm leaving it packed. One more time, Hiney, and I leave. This time I mean it! Sure, I love you, Hiney, but I can't help you.*"

But she didn't mean it. She'd kept everything packed now for three years. But she'd always just said next time, next time you go off on a toot, I'll leave. But she wouldn't leave. That was just her way of trying to help him. It wasn't a good way — it was hell — that stuff always packed, year after year, keeping a man dangling between here and there, never really living anywhere . . . everything a man lived with packed away all the time . . .

He sat rigidly on the edge of the couch. He felt the emptiness all around, the nakedness, the cold, the cold floor bare against his naked foot.

No, Susie wouldn't really go away.

He managed to get the cigarette lit, then sat there tapping his bare left foot stickily on the bare floor. Cold came up from the basement into the first floor apartment, and he could feel it against his foot.

When had she taken the rugs up and packed them away in the barrels and trunks and boxes? When had she done that? He couldn't remember now. The naked cold window there — why had Susie packed away those cheap curtains? They weren't worth anything, but at least they made a man feel he wasn't trapped in an empty apartment!

Why had she packed those away? Vacancies rushed in from everywhere all at once. New vacancies, empty holes, empty spots everywhere he'd never noticed before. The empty flower vases Susie had always kept filled. The darker squares on the walls where the pictures had hung, the *Blue Boy*, the *Vanishing American*.

She had never packed everything before. Now nothing was left!

Sobbing he ran through the three rooms. Everything packed this time. Everything gone. Even the dishes from the kitchen and the toaster she'd gotten with coupons from cigarettes. Not a damn thing left that was Susie's. But she didn't mean it. She never had meant it!

"Baby . . . you've got to help me! You can't leave . . ."

"*I guess I even love you, even now, Hiney*," she'd said. "*But I'm just too tired.*"

"But, baby, it's feeling all alone that makes me do it! If you leave —"

He ran into the bedroom and looked into the closet again. Her clothes all gone. Just that old hat of hers they'd bought in Miami, Florida in '43. The smell of perfume, of powder, that was all. He dropped on his knees and dug at the hairpin, and then he gave it up. He couldn't get his fingernail under it. He ran into the living room, past the trunks, boxes, barrels. Everything neat. Everything with a stamp on it. *Elite Moving and Storage Company*. Everything but an address.

She couldn't really have gone this time. Those things packed all the time, just a threat, that was all, just a way of trying to keep him out of the bottle. He ran back into the living room and flipped through the yellow classified. E . . . Ei . . . Ej . . . k . . . Elite. He dialed three times.

"Good afternoon," a careful woman's voice said. "This is the Elite Moving and Storage Company."

"My wife . . . Susie . . . where's she sending the stuff?"

"Pardon, sir?"

Easy, take it easy, they'll cut you off, they'll think you're nuts. "This is Hiney — Heinrich Martin. My wife had your company over here packing stuff. I'm supposed to get it shipped off, but I've lost the address. I was wondering if maybe she left any address with you. I figured maybe she planned for you to move it and —"

"Just a moment, sir. I'm checking."

He stared at the pillow case. Dirty and greasy, and she hadn't packed it. It had all the fancy needle work around the edge. But he'd been sleeping on it. She hadn't wanted to disturb his sleep this time. Hadn't even tried to snap him out of it, or had she? He could never remember.

"Mr. Martin."

"Yes."

"As we understand it, those items aren't to be shipped out of Man-

hattan anywhere. Mrs. Martin said everything was to be stored here until we received a forwarding address from her."

"Oh."

"Haven't the men with the truck showed up there yet, Mr. Martin?"

"Who?"

"The movers?"

"No . . . look, Miss, tell these movers it's all a mistake Tell them my wife has changed her mind. She isn't going to —"

She had hung up. He dropped the receiver and sat rigidly on the edge of the couch moving his bare foot up and down on the floor. Now he remembered that too.

"But where could you go, sweetheart?"

"*Oh God, Hiney, I don't know! Anywhere, someplace I can rest.*"

"But we don't have anybody, sweetheart. Just us. Your sister-in-law doesn't have any room. Who else do you or I have that we could — ?"

"*Just don't go on another toot, because this time I've got to leave. I don't know where. I'll just go —*"

"But where?"

"*Anywhere. I tell you I'm so tired — I can't fight it any more.*"

He sat like a rock on the side of a hill, afraid to move, afraid something would crack. It wasn't true. Not after all these years it couldn't be true. She would be back any minute now.

He dialed frantically. There was dust inside the dial there, but Susie had always kept everything clean. "Hi, Lewis. This is Hiney."

"Well, it was big of you to call, Hiney."

"Sure, well, Lewis, I been a little bit sick."

"Go on being sick, but not on me. I can't hold you up here any more. It's no good, Hiney. Don't come back any more."

"Shove your lousy job!" He heard himself screaming into the phone. "Shove your lousy used cars! I should've quit that cheap racket years ago. That's one thing Susie was fed up about —"

"So she's finally got fed up."

"You think I'd want to come back there, Lewis? You're nuts. Hell, I've made up to three hundred a week, just in commissions alone. Laugh, go on!"

"I know you had it once, Hiney."

"The hell with you, Lewis. What do you think that stinking job was there anyway, a handout? Hell, I kept you in business!"

"I know, I know. It's tough for me to go on without you, but I'll try."

"Wait, wait a minute, Lewis. I just wanted to see if Susie had been talking to you, about where she's going."

"She just said she was going. I haven't seen her for a week."

"Okay . . . take your stinking job and shove it, Lewis!"

He lay on the couch and pressed

his eyes. Tears — God, that was all he needed now, another one of those crying jags. Maybe if he had a drink — no, this was it. Susie — this is it. I've got it licked now. This time I know it. This time I feel it in the gut, all the way through, and — Susie — you've got to listen to me. Help me now . . . let's unpack all this stuff. Don't leave the stuff all packed all the time reminding me day and night that everything's right on the edge of nothing!

He got the Bronx number the first time without even thinking about it. He'd called out there too many times already.

"Ella, where is she?"

"I should tell you!"

"You've got to help me now, Ella!"

"A one-way ticket somewhere? I'll be happy to help . . . the happiest."

"Ella, this time I've quit! I've got to tell Susie . . ."

"You want to get buried, I'll help. Expenses paid."

"Damn you — let me talk to Susie!"

"She's out of town, out of the state. Maybe even out of the United States."

"Ella —"

"Even a rocket ship to Mars wouldn't be far enough."

"She's there! I know she's there!"

"She isn't here, Hiney. I don't know where she is. She just got out and I hope she keeps on going away from you in a straight direction."

"You know where she is! I just want to call her."

"So you can reverse the charges."

He screamed into the phone. "Who in hell are you to talk to me that way?"

"And don't come out here looking. She isn't here. You come staggering out here and Earl's just liable to put you in the hospital."

"That slob!" he was screaming and beating his foot on the floor. "I've made more in a week than that slob makes in six months! Listen — you listen —"

She wasn't listening. He dropped the receiver. The floor started trembling under his bare feet. Thud, thud, thud . . . that vicious pounding of the old biddy's broom handle on the floor.

He jumped up and down hard on the floor and yelled at her. The old biddy's broom handle thudded faster.

"Shut up! Whose apartment is this, this stinking junk pile? Don't I pay the rent? I'll go to the housing authority!"

He jumped up and down harder. He fell on his hands and knees and started pounding his fists on the floor.

"Go ahead, call the cops, call 'em. I'm waiting. This is my apartment. Go on, call the cops, you crazy old bag!"

Who the hell did she think she was anyway, sitting down there in

that basement hole in the dark? Too damn stingy to turn on the lights or the heat. He slammed the phone down on the floor. "Go ahead, call the cops!"

The knock was firm. He looked at the door. Susie! She was coming back. He was half sobbing and half laughing as he lunged at the door and fumbled at the chain and turned the night lock and jerked the door open. "Susie —"

"Mr. Martin?"

"Who are you? What the hell do you want?"

"We're from the Elite Moving and Storage Company."

"It's a mistake! Nothing here to move —"

He started to close the door. The bruiser in the green-checked lumber jacket and the big belly pushed his weight into the door. Behind him was a smaller man wearing a black turtle-neck sweater.

"Look, pal, we got orders to move some trunks and boxes and stuff."

"Get out of here, those are my orders. I live here."

"The landlady told us about that. She says you don't live here any more."

He was trying to push the door against the mover, but the mover was too heavy. He grabbed out and the mover pushed his arm down hard and it whacked painfully against the side of the door.

"Take it easy, buster. We got orders to take this stuff. The landlady said she was calling the cops because she knew there'd be trouble. But I don't want trouble with you, buster. *You* want trouble?"

The old lady ran along the hall and stood behind the man in the turtle neck sweater. She had a face like an owl, and she was holding a dirty shawl over her bony shoulders. You could see the dirt lining the wrinkles of her face.

She was screaming at the movers. "Go on! He don't rent apartment! He don't pay rent for weeks! He got notice!"

"Okay, lady, easy does it. We're going to move the stuff."

Martin lunged at the door again. He felt the tears welling in his eyes, and the rage was sending a weakness into his knees. He felt like he was going to fall down, and he didn't want to do that. He had to keep them out.

He lunged at the big man and swung at his face, a frantic pawing motion. The big man grinned a little and pushed out with the flat of his hand and Martin fell back, and the backs of his legs hit the coffee table. Something splintered as he fell backward and then he was on his hands and knees trying to get up.

"Go on in," the old lady was yelling. "Move it out! Move it! Move him out! He don't live here."

"Lady, we're moving it —"

"Nobody live here! His missus got out. He never pay rent. She pay rent. She gone. Nobody live here. Move it out!"

The room was wavering a little. He tried to get up. He saw the barrel rolling past him, then he saw the trunk moving toward the door.

"You punks," he whispered. "This is my place . . . you stinking punks . . ."

He crawled and grabbed. The foot slid off his cheekbone and he felt the blood running and he touched his face and looked at his fingers. He saw the blurred owlish face of the old lady screaming down at him. "Get out . . . get out!"

"We ain't paid to move him out, lady."

He had hold of the leg of the coffee table, but he couldn't seem to get any life into his arm. He could see the legs moving past, the big shoes clumping over the bare naked floor . . . another trunk . . . a couple of cardboard boxes moving out . . . another barrel rolling toward the hallway. . . .

"Christ, what does this guy do, collect bottles?"

"That's Susie's," he was whispering. "That's Susie's trunk . . . you can't . . ."

This time he felt the foot against his neck and he was sliding back over the naked floor. The wall pounded against his face.

The boxes seemed to float toward the door. The floor shivered under the weight of the heavy boots falling up and down, and another barrel made a creaking sound over the loose boards.

"There — there he is," the old lady was yelling. "He don't live here now . . . nobody live here . . . you move him out, cops . . . move him out!"

Blue uniforms and the room seemed full of people and the faces and bodies blurring and shifting and everything crazy. . . .

Somewhere he thought he could hear snow whispering on naked glass. Winter . . . winter comes in a week and you don't even know it's happening. Where does a man go in the winter? Sure . . . a man goes south in winter . . . he goes back to Miami where the big money is.

"All right, let's stand up now, and let's get dressed."

What was that? ". . . disturbing the peace and destruction of private property."

What about my property . . . my place . . . Susie's trunks and everything?

"Listen, listen now," he was trying to say and the officers were lifting him up and he was sitting on the edge of the couch. He wanted to lie down . . . no, he wanted to talk to Susie . . . ". . . don't put me out now, Officer. You listen . . . I'm waiting for Susie to come back . . . that's my wife . . . she isn't really going away. She'll be back . . . any minute now . . . you'll see . . . and I'm waiting . . . getting rent . . . I'm getting the rent and . . ."

There went another box. That was the last barrel rolling, rolling . . .

"Better get dressed, Mr. Martin, it's cold outside."

"You've got to listen —"

"Sure we will, but let's go someplace else to talk."

"This is it, officer! Believe me, I know. Something's happened this time for sure, and I know! I'm free of something . . . some kind of monkey's off me now! *I know it!*"

"Sure, but we can talk about that later, Mr. Martin. Now come on —"

"Let go! Damn you, let go! Don't you see . . . Susie will be back and what if she comes back and there's nothing here . . . no furniture, or rugs, or pictures, and I'm gone too? She won't stay. She'll think . . . think I'm running off somewhere . . ."

They were dragging the barrel through the door.

"What stinks?" The big man stopped and looked at his hands, then at the barrel.

"Maybe she packed a rat away in there."

"It sure has long hair."

"God, this is blood! Dried blood. This looks like a woman's hair!"

The officer seemed to be asking if any one had a hammer.

Who needed a hammer? Wait a minute? "You can't break into those boxes and barrels. Those are Susie's!"

What were they doing, unpacking Susie's things that way? Didn't they have any respect for private property?

The boards seemed to be ripping inside his own head, but he really didn't care about that any more. He was trying to think, trying to remember. He had a hunch. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Sure, south in the winter, like old times. That's where Susie had gone. She'd always talked about that place! Sure, that was it!

Even the old lady's scream didn't matter any more. "It's Mrs. Martin! Mrs. Martin in there —"

He saw the telephone on the floor and he started crawling toward it.

"It's Mrs. Martin in there . . ." the old lady kept screaming.

He wanted to laugh. What would Susie be doing hiding in a barrel? The old lady was a snooping old bag. He knew where Susie was.

Susie had always talked about that two week's vacation at the Sun Rise Hotel in Miami, Florida. Back in '43 when he'd been coining the good heavy money. Three hundred a week in commissions alone. Susie had always talked about that place like it was heaven, and she was always talking about how she'd like to go back there where they'd had such a good relaxing time in the sun. He'd put through a long distance call to the Sun Rise Hotel in Miami, Florida. He knew Susie was there . . . waiting for him . . . like the old days . . . South in the Winter.

He kicked out as he was dragged back away from the phone. The blue uniforms moved between his eyes and the window, and he was trying to get away, get to the phone, when they pulled him out of there.

Carlos is my friend. I want him to be free again. It doesn't matter that they say he's a murderer . . .

BY FLETCHER FLORA

The Day It Began Again

I WENT UP in the elevator to the top floor and out into a long, light corridor of smooth stone. I told a guard there who I was, and he took me down the corridor and let me through a gate of steel bars into a large room, and I went over and sat down on a straight chair facing a steel screen.

It was light in the room, just as it had been in the corridor, and it was very clean and up so high that

the surrounding buildings did not shut off the sunlight, and the sunlight slanted down in long shafts through the high windows that had heavy steel screen on the outside that was just like the screen I sat facing. I thought that it wasn't much like what you'd expect a municipal prison to be, not dark and gloomy and damp, and I thought that it would really have been better if it *had* been like that, like you'd expect it to be, because the way it was, it looked like someone was trying to make it cheerful, and it was a kind of perversion and only made it worse.

I sat and watched the shafts of sunlight and smelled the faint institutional odor, and after a while a door opened and closed on the other side of the screen, and Carlos came down and sat in a chair facing me, but he didn't look at me. He looked at his hands. He folded them on the narrow table-like ledge that ran in front of him and sat there staring at them.

His golden hair was as thick and curly as it had ever been, and his skin had a kind of glowing transparency, and in spite of the drawn muscles of his face and the heavy shadows under his eyes, he looked very young, no more than a boy, as if the years had not passed and the events of the years had never happened.

"Hello, Carlos," I said.

He lifted his eyes for a second, and they widened a little at the sound of my voice in the shape of his name, but he lowered them again without speaking and looked at his folded hands.

"How are you, Carlos?" I said.

But he didn't answer, only nodding his head a little, and I could see the extent of his withdrawal, what an incalculable distance away he was, and I began talking quietly about things related to the two of us, little things that had happened a long time ago and a short time ago, but whatever they were, or whenever, it made no difference at all, and it was no use trying. I couldn't bring him back.

After a while a guard came up to him on the other side of the screen, and it was time to leave, so I stood up and said good-by and started away, and then he spoke for the first time, using my name as if it were something he'd recalled suddenly after severe mental effort.

"Jake," he said.

I turned and looked at him through the screen, and he lifted a hand in a gesture of supplication, and I could see the luminous terror in his big eyes.

"Don't let them kill me, Jake," he said. "Don't let them."

Then the guard jerked his arm and led him away, and I went out and down in the elevator and walked about ten blocks to a park and sat on a bench in the sun. The sunlight was thin and didn't have much warmth in it at first, but it kept getting a little warmer as the sun

climbed in the sky, and I sat there for a long, long time thinking and watching the things that happened around me in the park.

About ten-thirty the kids began coming into the park from the apartment buildings near by, and the women who came to watch them play, the mothers or nurses or whatever they were, sat on benches and looked at magazines and books and lifted their eyes now and then to see where the kids were and what they were doing and to yell at them if they were someplace they shouldn't have been or were doing something they shouldn't have been doing. One of the women sat on the same bench I was on, but she didn't speak to me or even look at me, and I didn't speak to her, either, although I looked at her long enough to see that she was short and too heavy and not at all pretty. She was reading a book and was almost half finished with it, and her voice when she yelled at the two kids she'd brought was harsh and querulous, and it was evident that she didn't like to have her reading interrupted.

I kept thinking about Carlos in the old days and how it had been then. I didn't make an effort to remember anything in particular or in any particular sequence but just let things come and go in my mind however they would, and one of the things I remembered was the day he'd moved with his mother and father into the house next door to ours, and how he had come out in the afternoon and sat under a tree in the yard and had begun to play with some sticks he picked up off the ground. What he did was lay the sticks out in all the different shapes he could think of, all sorts of geometrical figures, and when he'd used up all the sticks, he gathered them up and started all over again and made different figures, and he kept doing it over and over until his mother finally came out onto the porch and called him into the house.

It seemed to me at the time a pretty dull way to spend an afternoon in the yard, and maybe that's why I remembered it and never forgot it, because it seemed such an odd thing to do, but what I remembered best was how beautiful he was. I watched him from my side of the hedge, and the sun filtered through the leaves of the branches above him and touched his hair with a kind of pale fire, and his hair was golden, really golden, and curled in silken ringlets all over his head like in the pictures of young Greek boys in ancient times that you saw in Bulfinch's Mythology. He had a face as delicately molded as a pretty girl's, and it gave me a kind of pain in the chest to see him there, and a kind of angry resentment, too, because it didn't seem right for a boy to be so beautiful and make another boy feel so ugly, but after a while I began to feel that resentment of beauty like that was ut-

terly futile, even a sort of sacrilege, and the resentment passed and never returned.

I grew to love him. I loved him very much, and he loved me, I'm sure, and it wasn't the kind of love you might have thought it would be between two boys, and later two men, but it was clean and sweet like the love between Jonathan and David, I think it was, and it was always the best thing in my life after it started, and probably it was the best thing in his life, too, though I can't really be certain of that, not knowing what it may have made him think or do or keep from doing.

Anyhow, it lasted. It was natural, and we didn't have to work at it to keep it alive, and it went on and on from year to year. He wasn't sickly or anything like that but was just delicately built, with small bones and all, and I did a lot of fighting for him, because there are always guys wanting to beat up another guy if he's too good-looking, and it wasn't that he was a coward, either, and afraid to do his own fighting, but just that he was delicately built this way and not good at rough stuff, and I wanted to do it for him.

Another thing, he was a genius. What they call a psychological genius. It means he came out very high on tests and was able to learn easily a lot of things many guys can never learn at all. Things like physics and trigonometry and calculus and such. He used to help me a lot and never consciously made me feel inferior, just like he never consciously made me feel ugly, and he'd have felt very bad if he'd known I'd ever felt that way, which I did for a little while, like I said.

I guess the strangest thing about him was his shyness. What I mean, a boy so beautiful and so brilliant might have been arrogant and vain because of it, and you couldn't have blamed him much if he'd been like that, but it wasn't so with Carlos, and the simple truth is, he wasn't *enough* that way. His shyness was so intense that it sometimes made him unhappy, and he had periods of depression that you couldn't see any reason for, but they were very real just the same, and his mind, in spite of being so sharp and all, or maybe because of it rather than in spite of it, seemed to be sort of delicate, like his bone structure, and not able to stand up to as much as a common sort of mind like mine, for instance.

The girls were wild about him, of course. You'd have expected that. On the other hand, though, he never showed much interest in the girls, and that was something you *wouldn't* have expected. Oh, he went out with them now and then as we grew older, and laughed and talked with them sometimes, and even took some of them to one of the popular places for cokes or something, but he never really got involved with any of them, except this one girl named Nelly, who was

very pretty and not a bad kid, but the thing she did to him was bad, and it almost ruined him.

She was wild about him, like the others, and she wouldn't let him alone, and she finally got him in a mess. There was a legal technicality about it, and it looked for a while like her old man, who was vindictive and mean as the devil about it, would have Carlos sent to reform school or prison or whichever it would have been in his case. What I said at the time and always afterward was that it wasn't Carlos's fault, and you had to consider that he was subjected to a lot more temptation and *pressure* about things like that than the average fellow, the girls losing their heads and throwing themselves at him as they did, and if the average fellow had that pressure on him, he'd be in trouble all the time. It didn't seem fair to hold him responsible. That's what this girl named Nelly thought, too, and she had the guts to say it, that it had been her fault and she'd pressured him into it, and that was what saved him in the end.

But he never got over it, and he never had anything more to do with girls, or women as he grew older. Like I said, he was sensitive about such things. He started seeing all of them as a menace, a terrible kind of menace that threatened his security and even his life and made him seem a monster or something in his own eyes, and they filled him, I think, with fear and anger, and those that must have appealed to him, that he must have desired in spite of everything, he feared and hated most of all.

I sat there on the bench in the park a very long time thinking about these things, and the woman on my bench stood up with a snap of her book and called the two kids and took them away, and gradually all the other women and kids went away, too, and the sun climbed the sky and started down the other side. It got to be time to eat, and past time, but I wasn't hungry, so I continued to sit on the bench, and after a while my mind got stuck on the last thing that had happened between Carlos and me, on the sight of him behind the steel screen with the luminous terror in his eyes and on the sound of his voice when he asked me not to let them kill him. It was a bad thing to think about, a disturbing thing, and I was glad when it was time for me to go. I left the park and walked through the streets to the Professional Building and went up in the elevator to the seventh floor. Down the hall from the elevator was a door with a pane of frosted glass that had *Wallace King, Attorney-at-Law*, printed across it in chaste gold letters. I went through this door into a reception room, and because I'd been there before, the receptionist recognized me and spoke to me by name.

"Do you wish to see Mr. King?" she said.

I said I did, and she said, "He's busy with a client at the moment, but I'm sure he'll be able to see you. Will you sit down?"

I sat down and picked up a magazine and leafed through it without seeing it. I put the magazine down and sat looking over the receptionist's head to the closed door of Wallace King's office, and I tried to arrange in my mind the words that I wanted to say to him, but I wasn't at all sure what the words were, or even what I wanted precisely to say, so it wasn't much use. After a short while the door opened, and a woman came out and crossed the reception room and went past me into the hall, and the receptionist snapped a switch on a box and said something and listened to something and then looked at me and nodded, and I got up and went into the office.

Wallace King stood up and offered me a dry hand and sat down again, and I thought that he looked old and tired in the light that came through the bank of windows behind him. His face was deeply creased and had the gray, dry look of dust, and his hair was thin and also gray and was brushed across his wide skull from a low side part. He looked a little like pictures of Clarence Darrow, and I had a feeling that he probably knew it and cultivated the resemblance.

"I've been to see Carlos," I said.

He closed his eyes and sighed and opened them again. "Yes? How was he?"

"Not good. He's very frightened, and he seems to be losing contact."

"I know. It's a kind of defense mechanism, that withdrawal. Perhaps in the end it will serve a good purpose."

"How do you mean?"

"In case of an insanity plea."

"The plea is not guilty."

"I've been wanting to discuss that with you."

"You mean you want to change it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He closed his eyes again and kept them closed for a long time, and when he opened them at last they were full of his age and his weariness. "Because he's guilty. Because the prosecutor will convince a jury without any difficulty at all."

I moved and felt the anger move within me. "No. He's not guilty. I believe that, and if you're going to defend him, you must believe it, too."

"Listen to me." He leaned across his desk and measured his words. "They have a witness who will identify him as the person seen running from the scene of the last crime. They have the clerk who remembers selling him a dozen pairs of thirty-six-inch shoestrings. How many men buy thirty-six-inch shoestrings? And Carlos is a person easy to remember, you know. They have other witnesses to testify to seeing him near the scenes of two of the other crimes about the time they were com-

mitted. Very convincing. Against this, we have nothing. No alibi for even one of the crimes. You lived with him. You lived in the same apartment for several years, and even you have nothing to offer. You say yourself that he wasn't at home any one of the nights when the crimes occurred."

"I could testify otherwise in court."

"A lie? Perjury?" He shook his head and was not shocked or angry but only tired and sad. He said softly, "*Are you sure that you want Carlos to go free?*"

"He's innocent," I said. "I want him free."

"Then you'll see him executed instead. He's guilty, but he's certainly also mad, and that's our only hope of saving him. We can support an insanity plea with convincing evidence. Remember his traumatic experience with the girl years ago. Remember the effect of that experience to which you and others could testify. Remember that he was forced to leave college for one year to receive treatment in a sanitarium for a serious mental breakdown. Remember that we can present professional opinions to support our plea."

"An institution for the criminally insane is no substitute for freedom."

"It's a fair substitute for death."

I stood up, the anger within me stirring and growing and making me sick, and he leaned back in his chair and looked up at me and then down at his desk quickly, as if the sight of me was something he couldn't bear any longer.

"How long has Carlos been confined?" he said.

"You know as well as I. Over a month. Almost five weeks."

"And how many women have been strangled in that time?"

"None."

"Exactly. But before that there had been one a week for six straight weeks. A pattern of method. A pattern of time. Don't you see? The discontinuance of the murders is the most damning evidence of all. The simple fact that they've stopped is pretty definitive."

There was nothing more to say, nothing at all, so I turned and went out of the office and out of the building and started walking back toward the apartment I'd shared with Carlos. It was a long way and took me over an hour to get there, and the sun descended the sky behind me, and its light thinned again and lost the little warmth it had gained. I reached the apartment and went inside and sat in a chair in the living room, and after a while the silence was more than I could stand.

There's only one chance left to save him, I thought. *Only one way.*

I got up and went into the bedroom and got one of the thirty-six-inch shoestrings that I had found in Carlos's things and hidden before the police came. I put the shoestring in my pocket and went out into the dark street.

The Meek Monster

Everybody thought Christie was just a mild, meek, ordinary English clerk — until they began to find bodies in his house.

BY EDWARD D. RADIN

EVEN the most exacting Hollywood casting director would have been perfectly satisfied. At the age of 55, John Reginald Halliday Christie presented the traditional image of an unimportant English clerk. He was a fussily neat little man of precise penmanship, with a filing-cabinet mind, a steady and conscientious worker at his routine office job.

Thin, almost scrawny, his years of hunching over a desk had left him stoop-shouldered, even when he tried to stand erect. His bald head was shiny and pink, and he wore large, horn-rimmed spectacles with thick lenses. Mild-mannered, most respectful to his superiors, he never seemed to lose his temper. The clothes he wore were in keeping with the picture, dark conservative suits, an ever-ready rolled umbrella, and subdued, almost drab ties.

And yet this meek, mild little man today occupies a niche previ-

ously reserved only for the notorious Jack the Ripper, as one of England's most infamous mass killers of women, and for a time, made Number Ten Rillington Place, Notting Hill, London, almost as familiar an address as Ten Downing Street.

Ten Rillington Place was at the end of a row of similar three-story narrow buildings that lined both sides of a short dead-end street. Once the neighborhood had been genteelly respectable and the attached buildings private homes, but by 1953 the structures long had been converted into mean little flats and the street was little better than a slum.

During the fifteen years that Christie had lived there in a three-room rear ground floor apartment, he had watched the decay set in, the paint blister off the doors and peel from hallways; outside the cracks spreading even wider as masonry crumbled. And that was why he was planning to move, get out of London altogether and settle up North, he explained early in 1953 to a woman neighbor who had asked him why she had not seen his wife, Ethel, since before Christmas.

Mrs. Christie, he told her, had gone to Birmingham to visit an aunt and also to prepare a new home for them. He would leave later and join her. The neighborhood had become too run down for them.

In February, he sold the heavy household furniture to a second hand dealer on Portobello Road and on March 20, 1953, left the house for good. He departed as quietly as he had lived there.

The landlord first learned that the flat was vacant when he came around to collect some back rent and found a couple preparing to move in. They explained they had paid Christie some seven pounds for the privilege of subletting the flat and learned to their dismay from the indignant landlord that the former occupant did not have the right to sublet. The owner already had a tenant waiting.

Four days after Christie had moved, the new tenant had his first chance to look over the rooms. The kitchen was in the rear with a door leading directly into a small walled-in garden. Surprised at the amount of trash that had been left in the room, he brought the junk out into the backyard. It included several tins, assorted papers and an old deck chair with the canvas missing and a sort of seat constructed out of pieces of cord.

While sounding the kitchen walls to determine where he could put up shelves and possibly install a bath since the flat lacked one, he noticed that a small wallpapered section gave off a hollow sound. The new tenant tore off a small piece of the wallpaper and then a second layer of protecting cardboard, exposing some woodwork. The cardboard had been covering a wide crack and with the aid of a flashlight the man peered in.

Seconds later he recoiled. The nude, partly decomposed body of a woman seemed to be suspended in space. The tenant let out a startled yell and raced outside to find a police officer. He returned with Sergeant Leslie Siseman, who glanced into the small aperture and confirmed that the frightened man was telling the truth.

Within a short time Chief Detective-Inspector Albert Griffin and Detective Inspector Lawrence Kelly of the Hammersmith police station were at the scene, followed by Dr. R. F. Camps, noted Home Office pathologist.

It was dark by now and since there were no lights in the flat, the officers worked with flashlights. A call was sent out for an emergency truck with a portable generator. Working carefully to avoid destroying any clues, the men stripped the wallpaper and cardboard away, exposing a small storage alcove. When the door was opened it was seen that the woman was resting on a blanket, partly covered by a mound of dirt and ashes. A torn strip of material had been attached to an inner wall of the alcove and then to her brassiere, which was up around her shoulder, acting as sort of a harness to keep her upright.

The men lowered the body to the floor. The woman appeared to be in her early twenties. Her hands were tied together, and there was a dark line about her neck, indicating that she had been strangled with a rope.

While Dr. Camps was kneeling to make a preliminary examination, one of the officers poked at the blanket inside the closet. "Sir," he suddenly called to Chief Griffin. "I think there's another one!"

The dirt and ashes were hastily brushed away and the feet of a second woman could be seen resting against the far inside wall. The shrouded figure was brought out and, when the blanket was removed, her head was encased in a pillow case tied around her neck with a stocking. Her feet were lashed together with a man's sock.

Dr. Camps snipped the stocking to preserve the knot and lifted the pillow case exposing the face of a pretty girl about the same age as the other. Her mouth was covered by a piece of flowered material. She was nude from the waist down, the upper half clothed in an undervest and outer garment.

Removal of all the debris in the alcove uncovered still another blanketed figure. It was a third woman, her head also hidden in a pillow slip. She was partly dressed and appeared to be a little older than the other two. Her ankles had been bound together with wire. Dr. Camps said she had been pregnant.

The same tell-tale noose marks were around the necks of all three victims. The bodies had been crammed into a space that measured four by five-and-a-half feet, and the killer had had to bend the knees of the victims to fit them in. From the

rate of decomposition, the physician estimated that each woman had been murdered at a different time over a period of some months. A more accurate determination would have to await the results of the autopsy and toxicological tests.

The report of the triple murder brought Chief Superintendent Thomas Barratt, a member of Scotland Yard's Big Six, to take charge of the investigation. Additional men and equipment were rushed to Rillington Place.

By now lights had been strung throughout the flat and technical men went to work hunting for clues, gathering everything they found for further study. The trash thrown out earlier by the new tenant was recovered for detailed inspection. Among the papers was a photograph of a woman in her fifties.

From the excited residents, officials learned of the recent departure of Christie, although no one knew exactly where or when. The woman in the photograph was identified as Mrs. Christie. Although the wallpaper stripped from the alcove appeared to be fairly new, officers doubted that the bodies had been sealed in the makeshift crypt in the short time after Christie had moved away.

At the same time, the picture of the meek little clerk that was being drawn by neighbors did not fit a wholesale murderer. No one had observed young women enter Christie's flat while he lived there.

Some of the officers working on the case knew the missing clerk. During World War II he had served as a reserve policeman. Attached to the Criminal Identification Division, he had been assigned to the Harrow Road police station and had received a commendation for his volunteer services when the war ended.

In addition, four years earlier, in 1949, he had been a leading witness for the Crown in the murder trial of Timothy Evans, a twenty-five-year-old truck driver, who had been charged with strangling his wife, Beryl, and their baby daughter. They had lived in the same house on Rillington Road.

At the time of his arrest, Evans claimed that when his wife became pregnant, the couple decided they could not afford another child and the truck driver confided his problem to Christie, who volunteered to take care of things without charge. Christie was considered by his neighbors as an expert on first aid.

He said Christie advised him not to be home during the illegal operation. Upon his return to the flat he found Christie carrying out his wife's body. The clerk told him that she had died during the operation, and that his baby had a fit and also was dead. He helped Christie bury the bodies and left London. Some time later he gave himself up to police.

His rambling story was given little credence by the jury, particularly after Christie took the stand and completely denied every single facet

of it. Evans was being tried for the strangling of his daughter, the prosecutor holding in abeyance another indictment charging him with the murder of his wife. Found guilty on the first charge, no trial was necessary for the second, and Evans was hanged in February, 1950.

Meanwhile, an intensive examination of the apartment continued during the night, all the following day, and still went on. A routine message, cautiously describing Christie as "wanted for questioning," had been sent out to all stations shortly after the three bodies had been found.

Scotland Yard men were uneasy about the fate of Mrs. Christie. Her aunt in Birmingham said she had not visited her as Christie had told neighbors. In fact, during the supposed visit the aunt had received letters from London seemingly signed by her missing niece. The letters were turned over to handwriting experts.

Any lingering doubt that Christie might be innocent vanished during the early morning of March 26th. Men were still combing the flat when one of them noticed that a floor board in the living room gave off a creaking sound each time it was stepped on. The worn linoleum was rolled back and one board seemed to be looser than the rest. Officers pried up the flooring with crowbars. The earth directly beneath it was covered with the ordinary rubble that builders leave.

Even so, shovels were distributed to several husky officers and they began to dig. Several hours passed while the men brought up nothing more than clumps of mortar, discarded bricks and splintered pieces of wood. By now they had dug a trench almost three feet deep and it seemed pointless to continue.

Suddenly one of the men hit something soft with his shovel and the crew began to scrape away the debris by hand, exposing a blanket. It was pinned together shutting off from view what was inside. They finally managed to hoist the heavy parcel up to the living room floor. Wrapped inside was the body of a fourth woman, her head also enclosed in a pillow case.

When the covering was removed officials had little difficulty in recognizing the new victim as Mrs. Christie.

Dr. Camps, who was at the morgue performing autopsies on the other three murdered women, rushed back to Rillington Place. He told the investigators that like the others she had been strangled. He estimated she had been dead longer than the others, probably about four months. This tallied with the fact that Mrs. Christie had not been seen since mid-December.

The hunt for the little clerk was intensified. A teletype message was sent to every police force throughout Britain requesting that the

search for the wanted man take top priority over everything else. Scotland Yard also took the unusual step of handing out photographs of Christie to newspapers, even though no charge had been filed against him, a technique that is constantly used in the United States. Officials feared he might add new victims to his list before he was caught.

With the finding of the fourth body, Superintendent Peter Beveridge of Scotland Yard ordered the removal of all tenants living in what had become a charnel house so that an inch by inch inspection of the entire building could be made. He said police would tear the building down brick by brick if it became necessary to find possible additional victims.

His grim statement was spurred by the autopsy reports of Dr. Camps and Dr. Nickolls, director of the Yard's forensic laboratory. Tests showed that each of the three younger women had been stupefied with gas and then garotted. All of them had been assaulted either just before or while they were dying.

The autopsies turned up one further unusual fact. The murders had been spaced just about one month apart, indicating that the killer was seized with a homicidal impulse at fairly regular intervals.

The three victims found in the alcove were still unidentified and their descriptions were sent to all police stations. None had been reported missing to police.

The post-mortems furnished a chronology of the murders. After Mrs. Christie, the first to have been strangled was the pregnant woman. She had been dead about three months. She was described as about twenty-five years old, five feet three inches tall, with light brown hair. She wore an inexpensive ring and had a bandage on her right index finger.

The next victim was dead about two months. She was in her early twenties, five feet five inches tall, with short blonde hair. An upper right tooth was missing.

The third was dead about a month. She was about twenty, five feet four inches tall, with gray hazel eyes. Her body bore an appendectomy scar.

A new portrait of Christie began to emerge. He had been employed as a clerk at the Shepherd's Bush depot of the British Road Transport, a large cross-country trucking concern. While his superiors had always considered him a quiet "good sort" of man, one of his fellow clerks had a different story to tell. Christie had been ill for some time the previous year and this clerk had taken over his duties and his desk. One day while searching through a drawer for supplies, he came across a batch of photographs of nude women, some of them in offensive poses. "Not the kind of thing a nice person cares to have about," he put it. When Christie returned, the other clerk mentioned the pictures.

He said Christie became furious and accused him of snooping. When he calmed down he explained that photography was his hobby and he had taken the pictures himself solely as a means of artistic expression. The other clerk snorted when he repeated this to the officers.

Investigators succeeded in placing Christie near Rillington Place on March 20th. He had breakfasted that morning in a fish-and-chips restaurant on the corner and later that same day had registered at a small hotel in King's Cross.

He had remained there for several days until the bodies were found. During his stay at the hotel he had exchanged his clothes with another guest, trading his raincoat and dark suit for a blue overcoat and a gray tweed suit. He evidently had fled in a hurry when the news broke because he left behind a large suitcase filled with changes of linen.

The short-haired blonde, who had been strangled in February, was the first victim identified. After reading the descriptions, her brother came forward and said he had not seen or heard from his sister, Hectorina MacLennan, 25, for some time. She had been born in Scotland and came to London in 1948 seeking work as a domestic. She had married a sergeant in the Burmese Air Force who was stationed in London at the time. Later, when he was transferred back to his home country, she claimed she was unable to join him when she failed to pass the necessary physical examination. Detectives, checking on her background, learned that she had been a friend of Mrs. Evans, who had been murdered in the same building four years earlier.

The second victim was identified as Kathleen Maloney, about twenty years old. A friend told police that she saw Kathleen in mid-January in a Paddington bar with Christie. She left with the little clerk and never returned. Kathleen was a B-girl. Orphaned while a child, the pretty dark-haired girl had been brought up in institutional schools.

Later that same day, two truck drivers recognized the pregnant victim as Rita Nelson. The girl had come to London from North Ireland the previous year and had worked part-time as a waitress in a restaurant not far from the depot where Christie had been employed. She was an art student and had posed frequently for artists and photographers.

While the identifications helped tidy up the case for police, it brought them no nearer to the problem of finding Christie. Yard officials also realized the significance that the three young victims had been girls of questionable virtue. Jack the Ripper had murdered such girls only, and Christie seemed to be following in his footsteps.

On March 28th, when the minute inspection of the interior of the evacuated building brought no more new victims to light, Superintendent Barratt ordered the rear garden

dug up. He had noticed an attractive rock garden in one corner of the yard and he directed the men to pay particular attention to that area.

Later that day, officials of Scotland Yard converged once again at the Rillington Place murder house. A rusted dust bin had been unearthed beneath the rock garden. Charred bones were inside. The men continued to dig and sift the earth and soon collected a pile of bone fragments as well as pieces of rotted cloth that might have been a woman's dress.

When the bones were assorted, newspapers had a new sensation to report. Two more victims had been found; the total murders now reached six. The bodies had been destroyed by fire.

Highly skilled anatomists assembled the skeletons and from the bones were able to tell that the victims had been young women. They had been dead about ten years. The skull of one was missing.

From an examination of the teeth of one of the victims, officials reasoned that she had been a European; they were capped in a way favored by dentists on the continent. With this clue to aid them, a study of missing persons files of that period led them to believe that she might be Ruth Feurst, a student nurse, who had disappeared in 1942. An Austrian war refugee, she had been 24 years old.

The second victim was believed to be Muriel Eady, 32, who had vanished in 1944. She had been reported missing by her father. It was thought at the time she was a victim of one of the Nazi air raids.

By now newspaper headlines had become bigger and blacker. "Will the Killer Strike Again?" one streamer screamed. Alert newsmen dug up the testimony Evans had given during his murder trial and people began to debate whether the truck driver had been guilty after all.

Police intensified their efforts to find the elusive clerk. As is customary in such cases, Christie was reported being seen in Brighton, Birmingham, Sheffield, almost everywhere. All the tips were painstakingly run down but led nowhere.

The break came on the seventh day of the manhunt. Constable Thomas Ledger, a brawny six-foot-two officer, was patrolling his beat in quiet Putney when he saw a man leaning against a railing of the Putney bridge idly watching a group of men loading a barge. The officer noticed that the man's clothes were rumpled as if he had been sleeping in them, and that he was unshaven. He answered the general description of Christie.

The Constable walked over and asked the man to identify himself. "My name is Waddington," he replied. He was directed to take off his hat. His bald head gleamed in the sunlight.

"You'll have to come with me," the police officer said quietly, and in

this manner Christie was captured. On the way to the Putney police station he admitted his identity and explained that Waddington had been his wife's maiden name.

Christie had no money left and only a short time before his capture had approached two men and unsuccessfully begged for money for a cup of tea. He had been in London during all the hue and cry for him and one day a Bobby had stopped traffic so he could cross the street. He had politely thanked the officer.

In his pockets he was carrying an identity card bearing his name, his marriage certificate to the woman he had murdered, and an old news clipping dealing with the trial of Timothy Evans.

He needed no urging to talk and made a series of lengthy statements to police. He not only admitted the murder of the six known victims but added that he also had strangled Mrs. Evans. He denied, though, having murdered her child.

He confirmed the identification of the two skeletons found buried in the garden. Ruth Fuerst, the pretty Austrian refugee, was the first woman he killed. He said he had been having an affair with her and she had been pestering him to leave his wife and go off with her. He had no intention of divorcing Ethel whom he had married at the outbreak of World War I.

One night while his wife was away, Ruth came to his flat. She again asked him to abandon his wife. He became angry, reached over for a piece of rope and strangled her. Afterward he tried to dress her and hid her body under the floorboards in the kitchen, later burning her remains along with the Eady girl, his second victim, whom he had gassed to death. He could offer no real motive for this murder.

His wife was his third victim, but here he insisted that it was a mercy slaying. According to his confession, she had been ill in a hospital and shortly after she came home had a seizure and was turning blue. He thought she might have taken an overdose of a sedative. Rather than see her suffer, he killed her. He said he left her in bed for several days before he finally buried her under the floorboards of the living room.

Since he was afraid inquiry might be made about his wife, he wrote letters to her relatives, forging her name in some, stating in others that she had arthritis and could not hold a pen to write. In one letter she had written to her sister but had failed to post, he had changed the date to give the impression that she still was alive. He admitted withdrawing her money from the bank and selling off her few pieces of jewelry.

As for the three young women found in the alcove, Christie said he had been offended by their loose morals. He claimed one of the girls had followed him home, forced her way into his flat, insisting upon going to bed with him. The officer taking down the statement glanced

speculatively at the middle-aged little clerk.

The rather useless-looking deck chair turned out to be part of his murder method. He said he got each one of his alcove victims to sit in the chair, which he kept in the kitchen. He had rigged up a piece of rubber tubing over the gas pipe with the end resting on the floor beneath the chair. He then would turn on the gas and when the girls showed signs of being overcome by the fumes, he would start strangling them.

The prisoner was somewhat vague about the murder of Mrs. Evans, claiming that he had strangled her because she had talked about suicide and wanted to die anyway.

On June 23, 1953, Christie was placed on trial in the same courtroom in Old Bailey where he had testified against Evans. Although Attorney General Sir Lionel Heald announced that he would be tried only for the murder of his wife, his counsel, Derek Curtis-Bennett, lost little time in bringing out the details of all the murders. "The case of the wife cannot be isolated, you must consider the whole case," he told the jurors, informing them that the defense would be insanity.

The Crown's case was short, consisting mainly of testimony by experts and witnesses to show how Christie had sought to cover up his murders and evade capture, indicating that he knew what he had done. Under English law the only recognized sign of legal insanity is that the defendant did not know the nature or quality of his act.

Christie took the stand in his own defense and while he freely admitted the different murders, his testimony was punctuated frequently with such phrases as, "I don't know," "I may have," "I think I must have." He had been gassed while serving with the British Army during World War I and had been seriously ill for several years after that. "Ever since the war I've got something on my mind and I can't get it out," he testified.

Asked why he had killed the different women, whether he hated them, the defendant replied, "There was no reason, no sense."

At one point he stated that he had dismissed from his mind the various bodies he had stashed about the apartment like so much cordwood.

Sometimes he frowned, at other points he wept. He sobbed while telling about the murder of his wife.

"I woke up in the morning about 8 o'clock. My wife was moving about and then I sat up in bed. I saw her lay there and she seemed convulsive. Her face was bluish and she seemed to be choking."

With his knowledge of first aid, he tried to help her breathe again.

"It seemed that she had gone too far and that by the time I could have gone for assistance she would have done. I did not like to see her like that." He paused and amid tears

lowered his voice and said, "I put her to sleep." He added, "We were very happy."

Justice Finnemore asked, "Did you really think your wife was almost dead?"

"Yes."

"Why did you want to conceal her death?"

"I do not think I wanted to conceal it at all. I did not want to be separated from her and lose her. That is why I still had her in the house."

While being cross-examined by Sir Heald, Christie maintained that he did not consciously or deliberately murder his wife but admitted that he probably would not have murdered her had a policeman been in the room.

Although he said in the courtroom that he had murdered Mrs. Evans, he continued to deny any knowledge of the murder of the child. "I don't know anything about what happened to the baby," he insisted. "I don't recollect seeing it."

In his appeal to the jury, defense counsel Curtis-Bennett said, "Here is this man living from day to day with those dead people in the garden, slowly rotting away to skeletons, the bodies in the cupboard becoming more and more rotten, smelling, you would have thought to high heaven, and it is said that this man is sane within the meaning of the law. He is most extraordinarily abnormal. There could not have been a better case than his wife's to prove his insanity. It is the most insane murder of the lot. We may never know how many people he killed."

While granting that Christie's behavior had been abnormal, the Attorney General remarked, "On such a principle every deviation from ordinary, sober responsibility would be emancipation from criminal justice. . . . The defense is trying to show you that if you kill enough people you must be mad."

The trial lasted four days and the jury required just a little over 80 minutes to find the little clerk guilty of murder. He was sentenced to be hanged on July 15th.

Meanwhile, his confession that he had murdered Mrs. Evans created a furore in England and a special commission was appointed to determine whether an innocent man had been put to death. The members visited Christie in his death cell.

They reported that Christie now admitted that he had not killed Mrs. Evans, that he had included her name on the list because he thought by admitting to more murders he had a better chance of being thought insane.

The little clerk had not been smart enough. He was hanged according to schedule.

His Own Hand

Alphabet Hicks was dead tired. So, naturally, the police picked that night to visit him and tell him about a man who was just plain dead.

An Alphabet Hicks Story

BY REX STOUT

When Alphabet Hicks got home a little before midnight, that Thursday evening in October, he found a man waiting for him at the top of the second flight of stairs in the dingy old brick building on East 29th Street.

"Where've you been?" the man demanded, confronting him.

In the dim light from the one little bulb at the end of the narrow hall, Hicks peered at him with yellow-brown cat's eyes. "I don't be-

lieve —" he began, and stopped. "Wait a minute. Sure. Sergeant Purley Stebbins who used to be on Homicide."

"I still am. Let's go in and sit down for a little talk."

"What about?"

"Homicide. Adam Nicoll."

Hicks nodded. "I rather expected one of you, but not a sergeant. I'm flattered. Also I'm tired and sleepy, and if we go in my room I'm stuck with you until you're ready to go, but I'm all for sitting down." He moved to the stairs, descended two steps, and sat on the landing. "What's wrong with this?"

Stebbins suggested a couple of things wrong with it, lost the argument, and propped himself against the newel. He was a big broad bulk towering above his target. "Where've you been?" he asked.

"Today and tonight, at Democratic campaign headquarters."

"Doing what?"

"Deciding how to vote. I'm a serious voter. I volunteer for two days' work at Democratic headquarters, and two days at Republican, and then decide. Responsibilities of a citizen."

"Yeah, I know, you're a card. How's the detective work coming?"

"Not coming." Hicks tilted his head back against the plaster to look up at the tower. "Let's get through with me and go on, so I can get to bed. I've never solicited detective work and I never will. The Harley case got me some notoriety, and the Brager thing some more, and a couple of others you know about, and that's all. R. I. Dundee still pays me a hundred dollars a week to think up things for him to worry about in his business, and I spend around ten minutes a day thinking. The rest of the time I look on."

"At what?"

"Life and death." Hicks gestured. "Come on, Sergeant, I'm not worth it. All I have is life, and you've got death on your hands. What do you want to know?"

"How long have you known Paul Griffin?"

"Four years. He came to see me. The publicity I had got had given him the idea I was full of remarkable notions, and he wanted me to hatch plots and stunts for his Kevin Kay. It didn't appeal to me and I turned him down, but he has kept after me and I've seen him off and on — maybe four or five times a year. Does that get us to Tuesday evening?"

"We can go back if we need to. What happened Tuesday?"

"He phoned that afternoon and said he had to see me — that was day before yesterday — and I went up to his apartment on Central Park West. He said he and his associates were in a jam, and lawyers had only made it worse, and they wanted me to meet with them that evening — not the lawyers — and see if I could iron it out. Do I need to tell you what the jam was?"

"We've had it from five angles."

Stebbins shifted against the newel. "We want yours."

"I'm tired and sleepy," Hicks objected, "but sooner or later, I guess, so why not sooner? Okay. Griffin first put his Kevin Kay into a couple of novels, that was some twelve years ago, and then movies, and then television. Forty million people think he's a wonderful character, and why should I argue? After Adam Nicoll played the part in eight or nine movies, and on TV for a couple of years, it was another case of Joseph Jefferson and Rip van Winkle, or William Gillette and Sherlock Holmes, you couldn't tell 'em apart, and it was hard to say who it was that had the forty million by the tail. As you know, Sergeant, that's not an angle, it's an open chapter in the history of contemporary American culture."

"Go ahead."

"Of course another element in the chapter, maybe minor and maybe not, is another character who appears in all the Kevin Kay stories called the Cricket, and in movies and TV Amy Quong has become the Cricket just as Adam Nicoll has become Kevin Kay. For the forty million Amy Quong *is* the Cricket. If you want my angle, one reason I shy off is all the damn K sounds. Not only Kevin Kay, which is more than enough, but the Cricket too. I deplore it."

"Thanks." When Stebbins was sarcastic he growled. "You said you're tired and sleepy."

"I am. Last winter Barry Maddox, the well-known producer, told Griffin he wanted to put a Kevin Kay play on Broadway, and after a lot of palaver Griffin agreed to write one. He finished it in May, and after a series of battles with Maddox about rewrites they were finally ready to start casting in August, two months ago. I can't tell you who it was who first suggested having the part of Kevin Kay played not by Adam Nicoll but by someone else, because I don't know. Anyhow, Griffin and Maddox agreed on it, and the someone else was Ernest Levitan, and Levitan read a script and was engaged for the part. However, they couldn't find anyone around to play the Cricket, or maybe they didn't try. Maddox flew to the Coast and proposed it to Amy Quong, and she jumped at the chance to appear on Broadway, and last week she came east."

Hicks twisted his wrist around to get the light from the one little bulb on his watch. Ten minutes of tomorrow were already gone. "Rumblings had been heard for some time from Adam Nicoll in Beverly Hills, and Sunday, four days ago, he arrived in New York and phoned Griffin from a hotel. He had his wife along. For several years it has been customary for Nicoll and his wife to put up at Griffin's apartment when they come to New York, and Griffin went to the hotel for them and took them to his place. Then the fur began to fly. Nicoll wouldn't stand

for Levitan playing Kevin Kay, but he couldn't do it himself, anyhow not this season, because he was scheduled for a Kevin Kay picture to start shooting in December, and also he had his TV contract. Barry Maddox insisted on going ahead with Levitan. Amy Quong wanted to be on Broadway and to hell with everything else. Griffin, who owns the characters and could have Jimmy Durante play Kevin Kay if he wanted to, couldn't tell Nicoll to go climb a tree because of the possible effect on the forty million. That was the jam Griffin told me about Tuesday afternoon."

"And wanted you to iron out."

Hicks nodded. "That evening after dinner."

"And you went. Who was there?"

"Paul Griffin, Barry Maddox, Ernest Levitan, Amy Quong, and Adam Nicoll and his wife. I didn't think there was much chance of ironing it out, but it would be fun to try, and besides, I wanted to meet Amy Quong. I have always wondered if the Oriental slant of my eyes had any genetic basis, and I wanted to see how I reacted to her."

"What was said? By everybody."

"My God," Hicks protested, "have a heart. I was there nearly two hours."

"Yeah." Stebbins shifted position. "Let's go in and sit down."

"Nothing doing." Hicks was firm. "You'd stay all night."

"I haven't got all night. When did you hear of Nicoll's death?"

"Early this afternoon at Democratic campaign headquarters. Someone had heard it on the radio."

"Has any of those six people been in touch with you today?"

"No."

"You've heard nothing from any of them, directly or indirectly?"

"Yes. Nothing."

Stebbins shifted again. The newel was not an ideal prop for a prolonged stay. "Nicoll was poisoned with cyanide. At nine o'clock this morning he ate breakfast at Griffin's apartment, alone. His wife and Griffin weren't up yet. Orange juice, toast and coffee. It wasn't in them, as it stands now. Immediately after breakfast he swallowed a large vitamin capsule, which he always does. In less than ten minutes he was sick. In five more he was in convulsions. By the time a doctor arrived it was too late to pump him, and at ten o'clock he was dead. So it was in the capsule."

"You can't buy cyanide capsules at a corner drug store."

"No, but you can buy it in a lot of forms for a lot of purposes, for instance a photographers' supply shop. You make a hole in the end of a vitamin capsule with a needle, squeeze out the paste, insert the needle of a hypo syringe loaded with hydrocyanic acid, squirt in, and heat the needle to seal the hole."

"I didn't."

"Somebody must have."

"Using one of Adam Nicoll's vitamin capsules?"

"Right."

"I saw them Tuesday evening. His wife asked him if he had remembered to take one after dinner, and he said no, and she went and brought the bottle from the dining room and he took one. The bottle had a blue label and the capsule was dark blue. Ernest Levitan asked to see the bottle and passed it on to Barry Maddox, making some crack about getting some since he was going to do Kevin Kay, which didn't help any with the ironing out. Did the capsule this morning come from that bottle?"

"Yes. It was there on the sideboard in the dining room."

"Then that should simplify it. Griffin or Mrs. Nicoll could have had a chance to take one and doctor it and put it back, but surely not Maddox or Levitan or Amy Quong."

Stebbins grunted. "No, but one of them could have bought a bottle of the capsules at any drug store, and practised the operation until he got one that looked right, and then all he had to do was sneak it into the bottle. Maddox and Levitan were there again all yesterday afternoon, and Amy Quong was there yesterday evening. You haven't been there since Tuesday?"

"Nope. Also I have no hypodermic syringe. Not to mention hydrocyanic acid."

"Yeah. We're on the routine on that, but you know how that is." Stebbins shifted his rump again. "We want a full statement from you about Tuesday evening, and you can make it at the DA's office tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. Right?"

"Right. So now I'll turn in."

"In a minute. You can tell me now anything that anybody said that might help. Anything at all."

"Let's see." Hicks yawned. "They were all more or less on Nicoll's neck, one way or another. His wife kept insisting that he should do Kevin Kay on Broadway himself, and was a little nasty about it, but that's somewhat personal because women who don't care how much they drink annoy me. I gathered that she doesn't like Hollywood. Nicoll said his lawyer had advised him that he had established a property right in common law in the part of Kevin Kay, and if Maddox went ahead and cast Levitan for it he would throw the book at him, including an injunction and a suit for damages. Maddox said he had invested a lot of time and money in the play, and signed up Levitan and the rest of the cast, and contracted for a theater for a December opening, and Nicoll could go choke himself. I suppose Nicoll and Maddox were both somewhat affected by a complication which you probably know about."

Stebbins nodded. "Mrs. Nicoll was formerly Mrs. Maddox. She left him for Nicoll three years ago. Does he still want her back?"

"I don't know."

"Does she want him back?"

"I don't know that either. It

didn't come up Tuesday. Paul Griffin said he would have been glad for Nicoll to do Kevin Kay on Broadway if movie and TV commitments hadn't made it impossible. Maddox said he wouldn't. Griffin said he would contract to pay Nicoll the same salary that Levitan would get, during the entire run of the play, and also he would guarantee Maddox against any loss through any kind of action brought by Nicoll, which I thought was damn generous. Nicoll accused Levitan of wanting to horn in on the part, not only for Broadway, but also later for the movies and TV. Levitan said, in a tone meant to leave scars, that that hadn't been in his mind at all, but of course it might work out that way, since it was the finest part in the whole entertainment field and people were already saying that Nicoll was lousing it up and would ruin it for good in another year. Amy Quong said — by the way, I reacted to her normally, a beautiful little creature — she said she loved everybody and everybody was wonderful, and she was sure Adam Nicoll would quit being mad at her because she was going to do the Cricket on Broadway with Ernest Levitan, and he wouldn't do what he had threatened to do, and anyway she didn't care for money so she had turned over all that she had saved to her father and mother. I got the impression that she had saved around two million dollars and it was in good hands."

Hicks got upright and, stepping up to the landing, was on a level with Stebbins. "That's the best I can do, Sergeant." He yawned. "Excuse me. I'll go down in the morning and fill it in. Goodnight."

Stebbins asked a few more questions, not cordial but not contentious, and tramped down the old wooden stairs. Hicks went along the narrow hall to a door, let himself in with a key, and was in the room he had occupied for more than a decade. Flipping the switch brought light from a lamp on a table by the far wall and a floor lamp off to one side next to a big easy chair. With the bed and dresser and book shelves, and a few pictures and another chair, the room still looked somehow bare, which was how he liked it. He had hung his topcoat in the closet and started for the bathroom when the phone rang, and he went to the table and got it and said hello.

"That you, Hicks?"

"Right."

"This is Paul Griffin. You've heard about Nicoll?"

"Yes."

"We've had one awful day. Terrible. Will you come up here to my place? Now?"

"What for?"

"We want to ask you what to do. You know about things like this and God knows we don't."

"Ask your lawyer."

"We have. To hell with lawyers, all they do is — damn it, we want to talk with you!"

"Who does?"

"All of us! We're all here. Amy Quong suggested it, and Maddox — all of us! We need a man with a head on him to tell us what to do in a mess like this. You'll come?"

"Okay. With my head on."

"Right away?"

"Yes."

Hicks hung up, muttered with feeling, "Of all the nerve," went to the bathroom, came out again, and crossed to the closet for his coat.

Even if you are a professional storyteller who, by luck or inspiration or both, has created and exploited a pair of gold-mine characters like Kevin Kay and the Cricket, you will do better on the West Side of the Park if you want an apartment with a living room you can take walks in and a dining room big enough to feed twenty guests. That was why Paul Griffin's address was the big old stone pile on Central Park West. For a bachelor his tenement on the fifth floor was quite a place. Taking a walk in the living room was not actually practical because of the clutter of chairs, tables, statues on pedestals, couches, cabinets, cushions, and enormous portraits in oil of Kevin Kay and the Cricket on easels; but it would have been perfect for a steeplechase.

When Alphabet Hicks was led in and through the clutter by Paul Griffin to where the group was gathered around the fireplace, he stood and looked around at them. They were a dismal sight. Ernest Levitan, sprawled on a couch, might have been cast for a lost soul headed for hell instead of Kevin Kay on Broadway. Cynthia Nicoll, at the end of the couch with a drink in her hand, her corn-silk hair frowzy and her blue eyes puffy, tried to focus on the newcomer and couldn't make it. Amy Quong, a dark compact figurine cross-legged on the rug, was staring at the fire and didn't move. Barry Maddox, the producer, normally big and broad and genial, was a vague sagging mass propped against the high back of a teakwood chair. Paul Griffin, usually meticulous of manners, collapsed his lanky frame onto a chair while his invited guest still stood.

"So," Hicks remarked, "it's been a hard day."

"Good God," Maddox muttered. "Hard?"

"I think," Levitan said wearily, "I've got the record. Eleven hours straight. I've been questioned by five detectives and two assistant district attorneys. One of the detectives was an inspector. Griffin is the runner-up with four and two. Tomorrow will be another day."

"It hazh been —" Cynthia Nicoll began, stopped, and set her jaw.

"It hazh been what?" Levitan demanded.

She wobbled her head. "We ought to be in bed, resting up for tomorrow," Levitan said tragically. "But

Maddox insisted on getting you up here. What for? You tell us."

Barry Maddox grasped the top of the chair back and straightened up a little. "Don't mind him, Mr. Hicks. He's an actor. We all wanted to consult you, knowing of your past exploits. We are under suspicion of murder, and you know what that means. My lawyer has given me certain advice as to what I tell the police, and he has also advised me to have no contact whatever with any of these four people because one of them is a murderer and I might compromise myself. That's not the way I like to act and I want to know what you think of it. Also we want to tell you all about it and ask you if you think the police are justified in limiting their suspicion to us. Why couldn't it have been someone else? Why couldn't the poisoned capsule have been put in the bottle a week ago, out west? Why couldn't Nicoll have killed himself, and done it that way to throw suspicion on someone? We want to ask you, Mr. Hicks. You didn't get us out of our jam Tuesday evening, God knows you didn't, but you impressed us."

Amy Quong had pivoted on the rug to give Hicks her black eyes. "You impressed me here," she hissed, placing the fingertips of both hands delicately between the famous little breasts of the Cricket. "Won't you sit? Near me where I can feel you?" She patted a cushion beside her. "Here?"

As Hicks went and lowered himself onto the big fat cushion, Paul Griffin spoke. "It's worse than a jam now," he said. "It's a calamity. What the devil do we do, just wait until they clamp onto one of us? Damn it, we can't! I know I can't! Of course you probably don't know — ask us anything you want to."

"Don't ask me!" Cynthia Nicoll blurted, and put her glass down.

Hicks felt something on his knee and looked down to see Amy Quong's lovely little dark hand resting there. He sent his eyes around. "As for telling you what to do," he said, "that's a big order and I can't fill it. I was rather expecting you to ask me to find out who killed Adam Nicoll, but that's not it."

"We couldn't ask you to pass a miracle, could we?" Levitan demanded.

"No, I suppose not, but it's a pity that's not what you want, because I already know who killed Nicoll."

They goggled at him. Ernest Levitan sat up. Amy Quong's fingers on his knee closed into a fist. Barry Maddox said, "That's a good line, Hicks. You ought to use it in a play, end of the second act. See the audience reaction?"

Hicks shook his head. "It's not a line, it's a fact, only I exaggerated a little. I should have said I'm pretty sure I know, say ten to one sure. Get the same effect. Right now one of you is having a hard time with his face, and also inside his skull. Am I bluffing or have I really got something? Wouldn't he — or she,

since I mustn't slight the ladies — like to know?"

"We all would." Maddox had released his hold on the back of the chair and quit sagging. "Suppose you tell us."

"It's a good gag," Levitan said, but not wearily.

"Not a gag," Hicks declared. "When I was here Tuesday evening one of you said something that struck me as pretty remarkable, but I skipped it. People do say remarkable things. Today at lunch time — yesterday now — when someone told me the radio had said that Adam Nicoll had died suddenly and the police were investigating, I wasn't reminded of it because I didn't know enough. But when I got home a couple of hours ago a Homicide detective was there waiting for me, and he told me the details, and naturally I remembered. Among other things he asked me to tell him anything that was said here Tuesday evening that might help him, and I did so, including the remarkable item I have mentioned. If he spotted it he gave no sign. I'm to go down to the district attorney's office in the morning and make a full statement, and of course that item will be in it, and no doubt sooner or later someone will notice it and come to the same conclusion I did, that the one who said that remarkable thing killed Adam Nicoll. If they miss it I might even call their attention to it, but I wanted to chew on it first. Right after the detective left the phone call came from here, and I chewed on it coming uptown, and decided I might as well spring it."

"I never said a remarkable thing in my life," Levitan asserted.

They looked at him, and then at one another, in tense collective vigilance. "Who said what?" Paul Griffin asked quietly.

Hicks, not wanting the distraction of the soft touch of Amy Quong's little hand, lifted his knee and clasped his fingers on it. "First," he said, "I ought to check a little. After all, a ten to one shot is not always a shoo-in, and I could be wrong. For all I know, one or more of you may be already ahead of me. Of course I saw the bottle of capsules here Tuesday evening when the rest of you did, and Nicoll took one. Afterwards, as I remember it, Levitan asked to see it and Nicoll handed it to him. Levitan took a look at it and handed it to Maddox, who also gave it a look and then handed it to Mrs. Nicoll, and she put it down on that little table," Hicks pointed. "It was there when I left. Then what happened to it? Of course you've been over all this with the police."

"We certainly have," Griffin said with feeling. "It was there on the table when Levitan and Maddox and Amy left, and Adam and Cynthia and I went to bed. When the maid cleaned up in the morning she she took it to the dining room and put it on the sideboard. Adam was alone at breakfast, but the maid

saw him take a capsule from the bottle and leave it on the sideboard, and as far as anybody knows it was on the sideboard all day Wednesday. After dinner Wednesday, before we came in here for coffee, Adam himself went to the sideboard and got out a capsule, and presumably the bottle was on the sideboard throughout Wednesday night. Next morning after breakfast Adam took another capsule, and that —" Griffin swallowed, with apparent difficulty, as if he too were trying to down a capsule. "That was the one."

"And Maddox and Levitan were here all Wednesday afternoon, and Miss Quong that evening. Right?"

"I wasn't in the dining room," Amy Quong declared, in her high thin voice that always had a suggestion of a tinkle.

Hicks nodded. "I know how that is. But you can prove a negative only by proving a positive, and I don't need that. I do need to know whether the police have got a real pointer. That Maddox or Levitan went alone into the dining room for something Wednesday afternoon wouldn't be enough. If one of them was seen with the bottle in his hand I might want to chew some more. If he was seen unscrewing the cap and putting something in, I'll go home and leave it to the law. Is there anything like that?"

"Not on me," Maddox snapped. "I never saw the damn bottle after Tuesday evening."

"Nor me." Levitan was not cocky. "I was in the dining room, certainly. We had lunch there."

Hicks got up and stood with his back to the fire, his hands in his jacket pockets. "Then I'll give it a try. I want you to know that I wouldn't be doing this if I hadn't been asked to come up here. I thought it was nervy to ask me, but maybe not. Who suggested it?"

"I did," Barry Maddox said. "And I think you've done enough stalling."

"Did anyone oppose it?"

"I don't think so. No."

"Even so, it may not have been nerve, merely discretion. I'm not stalling, Mr. Maddox. I'm just making it a little harder for a murderer to hang on after the hard day he's had. I can't indict him, since I have no evidence, but I know him and think I can crack him. If I have this right, and I think I have, it's a strange business. In a way, a man has died by his own hand. In a way, it wasn't Adam Nicoll that was murdered, it was Kevin Kay. Kevin Kay was murdered because there had to be a death before there could be a resurrection. I admit I had —"

"Skip the goddam riddles!" It was Ernest Levitan, not acting. "If you've got no evidence, what have you got?"

"I'm telling you." Hicks' voice sharpened. "I admit I have an advantage on the police, since I was told of the plans for the resurrection long before the death was plotted, and possibly before it was contem-

plated." His eyes went to Griffin. "You remember, Paul, telling me of the projected play? And later that Levitan would do Kevin Kay in it?"

"Of course." Griffin was undisturbed. "I told several people."

"No doubt. And some of them may have thought as I did. What I thought was that you had been driven to desperation. You had finally found it intolerable that a mere movie actor had usurped the glory and acclaim rightfully due to the creature of your own brain, your Kevin Kay. To millions of people Adam Nicoll was Kevin Kay, the two were indistinguishable, and since for years you had identified yourself with Kevin Kay, that was insufferable. You were in an agony of resentment and rancor. You did your best to conceal it, and it may even be that I was the only one who noted the glint in your eye and the strain in your voice when you spoke Nicoll's name, though I doubt it. You never put it into words. At your trial for the murder of Adam Nicoll, I doubt if a single witness can be produced who will say that he heard you speak spitefully of Nicoll."

"For God's sake," Griffin snorted. "Me on trial? Me?"

"You're already on trial, and you know it. So when Maddox asked you to put Kevin Kay in a play you saw your chance. By putting another actor in the part, the hold of Nicoll on the public mind and heart as the one and only Kevin Kay would be loosened and eventually broken. Two Kevin Kays would be too much for idolatry, and it would all come back to the true Kevin Kay, you.

"This is not a mere surmise; no other motive could have impelled you to write the play and let Maddox put another actor in the part. You knew it would infuriate Nicoll. You didn't do it for money, because you wouldn't get it anyway; you were already above the eighty per cent income tax bracket. I know you said you wanted Kevin Kay on Broadway, but that wasn't good enough, at least not for me after I had heard you trying to control your voice when you spoke of Adam Nicoll. That's a good idea, clasp your hands to keep them from trembling. But remembering how you felt about Nicoll, you can't keep from trembling inside. You're going to crack, Paul, you're bound to crack.

"That may sound brutal, but it isn't. I'm deliberately trying to break you down because it will save you harder days than today. If you tell us now where you got the syringe and the poison and the capsules to practise with, it will soon be over. If you don't, if you try to hold on, it may take the police weeks to find out, months even, but sooner or later they'll get it. Do you want to live through those weeks and months? Can't you feel them now?"

"Jesus," Levitan whispered, and asked aloud, "Do you have to? Look at him!"

Amy Quong, on her feet, went to Griffin and put her hand on his shoulder. The Cricket would have done that.

"Go on," Griffin told Hicks in a thin tight voice. "What did I say Tuesday evening?"

"Not much, but enough for the purpose. In a moment. All that about putting Levitan in the play, I thought all that months ago, and it was nothing in my soup. I wished you luck, but I wasn't surprised when you phoned Tuesday and told me Nicoll had come to New York and fur was flying. After an hour here that evening it looked to me as if you were cornered. If you dropped the play your whole plan was sunk, and if you didn't, Nicoll was obviously going to raise a stink that might tie up Kevin Kay for years. When you said you would pay Nicoll the same salary that Levitan would get for the run of the play, and that you would guarantee Maddox against any loss that might result through any action brought by Nicoll, I thought you were cuckoo. It might ruin you and Kevin Kay both, and I couldn't see how you were figuring it. I didn't ask you, because the others were here, and by that time I had about concluded you were no longer capable of figuring."

Hicks stepped two paces away from the fire at his back, which took him closer to Griffin. "But when I heard from Sergeant Stebbins tonight how Nicoll had died, I realized that you had figured plenty. If Nicoll was going to die in a day or a week — exactly when didn't matter — your offer to pay him and guarantee Maddox risked nothing and would cost you nothing, even if it had been drafted by lawyers and signed. So it looked to me as if you knew Tuesday evening that Nicoll was going to die. I said before it was a ten to one shot, but now, looking at you, it's a thousand to one. Your two big mistakes were making that offer when I was present to hear it, and just dropping the capsule in the bottle. With the bottle right here in your dining room, you must have had ample opportunity to shake out some of the capsules, put yours in, and return the others. Then Nicoll would have died days later, probably after he had returned to the Coast, and that would have been different. Now it's this way. You understand what I meant, Paul, when I said that Kevin Kay was murdered by his own hand."

Griffin nodded. "Yes," he said clearly. "I understand."

"And you see how it is. There's not a glimmer of a chance. Are you going to try to fight it? Are you going to hang on until they get enough to lock you up?"

"No. I might if I thought I could get you to drop it, and if these people hadn't heard it. No." Griffin

left his chair and was upright, straight, tall and lanky. He looked around at them. "It's all over, my friends. Amy, you little devil. Cynthia, you poor neurotic souse. Barry and Ernest, you lucky slobs, this will make the play, it will run forever. All right, Hicks, what?"

"You can tell me things. Or I can take you downtown in a taxi. Or I can phone and they'll come."

"Just a moment." He turned and grasped the arms of the chair he had occupied, a chair so big and heavy that it took a man to lift it and raise it above his head, which he did. With it aloft, he went across to the easel which held the life-size oil of Kevin Kay, and hurled the chair straight at its middle.

The chair went right on through, making tatters of the canvas, and the easel toppled and crashed to the floor.

Griffin turned and told Hicks, "All right, phone."

Illustration by Ray Houlihan

Mug

Inspector Schmidt had a personal interest in the case. It was Inspector Schmidt who had been mugged by the dead man.

An Inspector Schmidt Novel

BY GEORGE BAGBY

Shot

IN ALL the time I have known Inspector Schmidt I don't believe I have ever had to meet him on a street corner. Whenever we've planned to meet it would be in his apartment or at mine, in his office down at headquarters or at that lunchroom in Center Street where he goes to snatch bad coffee and worse apple pie.

Even if our meeting was to be in some part of town where neither he nor I had one of our regular anchorages, there would always be the nearest precinct station house where he could go to wait for me or I for him. That is the way it has always been arranged. The way it has always worked is something else again.

If, as it happened, I should be the one who had done the waiting, then we would come together at the appointed place. But there is a restless impatience in the inspector's character which makes it quite impossible for him to settle down to simply waiting around. If he is on a case and stalking a quarry, that is something quite different. His patience for that sort of thing is endless and unwearying. It is only idle waiting that exasperates him.

He stops in at the appointed place and looks for me. He waits for a couple of moments. Then he starts walking. He walks down as far as the corner, keeping an eye out for my car, looking into each taxi that comes through the street. He'll hesitate a moment or two at the corner and then he'll be strolling again, walking along in the direction from which he expects me to come.

I'm accustomed to it. Once I'm within three blocks of our meeting place, I'm keeping my eye peeled for him. If I am driving my own car, I'll make the best time I can until I hit that three-block margin and then I slow down, watching for Schmitty.

When I'm in a cab it's more complicated. You give a cabbie an address and you tell him you want him to make time. After that it takes too much doing to get it over to him

that, when he is just a couple of blocks short of delivering you to your destination, you are changing the plot on him and you want him to switch over to loafing along as slowly as the law will allow.

In cabs it usually works out so that we're already past Schmitty before he's spotted me or I've spotted him. Then it's another half block getting the idea across to the cabbie that you want him to stop. Squealing brakes, backing up, Schmitty running toward the cab — it's an exciting deal in a monotonously boring sort of way.

The night the mugger picked on Schmitty we had arranged to meet.

He'd had some business at Homicide Squad West and that's over on West Twentieth Street, which is as good a place for it to be as any. It's one of the more mixed neighborhoods of what, year after year, is becoming an increasingly mixed sort of city. It's the area known as Chelsea. Hell's Kitchen isn't far away. The Hudson River docks are pretty close. There's a big theological seminary sprawled in the middle of it and there are some biggish, upper-middle apartment blocks scattered around it. There is one hotel which is filled up with writers and painters who live there because it is cheap and because they think they are seeing life in the raw when what they are actually seeing mostly is each other. There are dozens of other hotels that are cheaper and where life runs rawer than the writers and painters ever dreamed. There are slums as bad as any you'll find on Manhattan Island and there are big reaches of slum where it's gone so bad that the buildings have been condemned and boarded up, given up to the vermin that had been taking them over in any case.

It's a part of town which the growing city in its northward push somehow has passed by. In front of the big apartment blocks the uniformed doormen stand and pretend they don't see the hookers who are working the other side of the street or the drunks who are taking their ease in the gutter across the way. For the theological seminary the neighborhood is a missionary field at its doorstep. The seminarians are further blessed by the proximity of a little old lady who has a shop on the avenue. It is a tiny shop in which she makes perfect strawberry jam, cooking it in her shop window by no heat except that of the afternoon sun.

I was in a cab that night and my cabbie was bowling down the avenue at a good clip. They've put those avenues into one-way traffic and the lights are staggered so that once you've hit them in the right tempo you can go breezing along and never hit a red. My cabbie had easy sailing.

We were coming into an intersection just two blocks above where we should have stopped when I spotted the inspector. He was walking up the avenue, coming to meet me. There was a car near the curb.

It didn't look as though it were parked. It looked as though it might have been waiting to make the light. It was a big Caddy. I caught the license number.

I was opening my mouth to yell at the driver and tell him to pull up when this character came twitching out of the shadows and loomed right behind the inspector. I forgot about the cabbie and I tried to yell a warning instead. It wasn't any good, of course, because the window was up and there was I yelling and rolling the window down all at once.

The cabbie, unfortunately, was a boy who had one of those minds that doesn't ungroove quickly and he was grooved in making that intersection just in time to hit it when the light went green. Of course, he heard my yelling; but evidently he had ticketed it as something for later attention.

Just before we whizzed abreast of the waiting car, it happened. This character was just one pace behind Inspector Schmidt. I couldn't see much, just the silhouette of the guy, but it was an odd silhouette. The fellow was tall and thin, unnaturally so in both dimensions. He had a long narrow neck and a long narrow head. He brought his arm up. It was a long arm and it moved with jerkily convulsive timing. It also moved fast.

It happened all at once. The arm swept around Inspector Schmidt's neck and jerked him back. At the same time the other hand came up and dropped with a vicious chop. The inspector reeled a step or two and toppled, and that was all I saw. My cab was rolling forward, and now the car by the curb was squarely between me and the inspector. I couldn't see a thing.

2.

The cab kept right on going.

"Back up," I shouted at my cabbie.

"Across the intersection? Who pays my fine, brother?"

"All right," I growled. "Then stop. I'll walk back."

I reached for the door handle and hit it hard. I had noticed that it was a pretty ramshackle cab I'd picked up, but I didn't expect that the door handle was going to come away in my hand. I swore at it and dropped it. The damn cabbie stamped on the gas and was off with a charge.

"Now, look, mister," he said severely. "You've busted one door. When you want the door opened, I'll open it for you."

"You look," I snarled. "A man's just been assaulted back there. Stop this cab and let me out."

My cabbie had ideas of his own. He swept straight ahead.

"Look, mister," he said again. "What you want to get mixed up in anything for? Maybe you don't know this neighborhood, but take my advice. You come through this part of town at night, you don't see anything, you don't hear any-

thing. That way you'll live long enough to die in bed."

For the moment I gave up any idea of opening the door that still had a handle. If I jumped out of the cab at the speed it was going I was a cinch at least to break a leg and I wouldn't have done too well at getting back to the inspector on one leg.

I forced myself to hold my temper and I went into the complete explanation. "That man I saw being mugged," I said, "was the man I was on my way to meet. He can be dying for all we know. Get me back there and make it quick."

The cabbie slowed down. We were well out of the neighborhood then and down into the Village.

"I've got a better idea, brother," he said. "See that drug store over there? Why don't you go in there and phone the cops?"

He opened the door for me. I nipped into the drug-store phone booth and called the police. I carry that number for Homicide West around in my head and the boys over there would be closer to the inspector than anyone. I called Homicide West and put them on it.

I came back out to the street, rehearsing all the things I would say to that cabbie of mine while he drove me back uptown. I didn't get to say them. He had preferred to turn his flag up and take the loss on my fare. He had taken off.

I picked up another cab and headed back for that corner. With the one-way-traffic deal, of course, he had to go west a block and come back around. I sat on the edge of the seat and fidgeted all the way.

Coming through the side street, we hit the avenue again. For a moment I found it hard to believe that we could have the right corner. It was bare, deserted. There was no car waiting, no mugger, no Inspector Schmidt.

"This where you wanted?" my cabbie asked.

"Yes," I said, "but hold it."

He pulled up and I piled out of the cab. The cabbie watched me with undisguised curiosity while I examined the pavement and found nothing. He was still watching me while I checked the shadowed doorways along that stretch of the avenue. I really don't know what I was looking for in those doorways.

After a few moments of that sort of nonsense I did begin to make better sense. I had called Homicide West. In the time it had taken me to pick up this new cab the boys had made it over to this corner and they had long since picked the inspector up and taken him away. I did have the nasty thought that they might have come around here and not found the inspector, but I immediately put that one aside as nonsense. It couldn't have been that way, because if it had, the corner would now have been swarming with cops. I could assure myself that by this time the inspector was most certainly in friendly hands.

I climbed back into the cab and told the hackie to go on down to Homicide West.

3.

"We got him, Mr. Bagby," the lad at the desk sang out as soon as he saw me come charging in.

"The inspector?"

"The inspector, sure. There wasn't a chance we'd get the mugger."

"How is he?" I asked.

"By now, I figure, he's getting pretty sore. When we had him here, he was too groggy even to get sore. He's got a scalp cut, a real long one. Looks like he was creased with a lead pipe maybe."

"Can I see him? Is he here?"

"No. They took him over to the hospital to get his head sewed up."

I did go over to the hospital but not immediately. I got straightened around on the story first, giving the detectives what I had, getting from them what they had. What I had for them you already know. My description of Inspector Schmidt's assailant was necessarily of a pretty general nature. The best I had for them was the possibility of a witness, a witness who would have had a much better view of the thing than mine had been. I told them about the big Cadillac and I gave them the license number. They were happy to have that, and they put the number into process immediately.

It wasn't the first they had heard of the car. The inspector had also seen it and he had mentioned it. He'd had the same description as mine, a new Cadillac with a special body job, but he hadn't seen the license number. He also had not seen his assailant.

The detectives had gone out on my call and they'd found the inspector. He had been knocked out by the blow, but, before they reached him, he had recovered consciousness and had struggled to his feet. When they had found him, he had been struggling and reeling down the avenue, heading for Homicide. He had done about a block before they'd picked him up.

They had, of course, gone to the corner and had covered it completely, but by that time there had been nothing and nobody there. The inspector had been up to telling them what he knew. According to his story, he had walked up the avenue and had started walking back. The Cadillac had come slowly down the avenue, coasting up to the intersection. He had paid little attention to it since he was watching for me and he knew that if I had been driving myself, it wouldn't have been any Cadillac. That good the writing game isn't. He had just turned to look up the avenue again when the arm had come around his throat and he had been conked on the head.

The mugger, of course, had rolled him. His watch and his billfold were gone.

A couple of the boys ran me around to the hospital to see Schmitty, but I wasn't allowed into his room. They had sewn up his head and they had shot some sedatives and stuff into him. The idea was to get him some sleep and they weren't going to let me disturb him. There wasn't any skull fracture and, although right at first you can never get doctors to go out on any limbs about concussion, they were going so far as to say that if there should be any concussion, it would be very slight.

Talking to them made me feel a lot better, and I called it a night and went home to bed. I did have some trouble getting off to sleep and when sleep finally did come, it was the kind of sleep that doesn't do a man much good. It was shot with dreams. I can only remember one of them.

It came out of the business that had taken the inspector around to Homicide West that night. It was a killing that had been in the works for days, one of those simple things that had been getting nowhere. Early in the week a patrolman had come on the body of a man among the rusted tin cans and broken bricks in an empty lot over in the Hell's Kitchen area. The man was dead of a fractured skull. All his pockets had been turned out and there had been bruises on the neck, the sort of bruises any cop can read like a book. The thing had looked to be completely clear from the start. The dead man had been a mugging victim and the mugger had misjudged his own strength.

When they are like that, nobody can do much with them, but that will never keep Inspector Schmidt from trying. The dead man had been identified and he had happened to be a narcotics user, but nobody expected that to be much help.

So I dreamt about that. But it was the inspector who was being felled in the empty lot and then, dream-fashion, the inspector came along and made a second entrance into my dream scene. The inspector was bending over the inspector's body, doing an investigation of his own murder.

As dreams will, it all seemed quite reasonable. Waking was far harder to understand because it was the inspector himself who had me by the shoulder. The fact that it was the inspector bothered me a lot, because the inspector, I was convinced, was down at the hospital.

But that was the least of it. I had some trouble adjusting to Schmitty in the flesh since he was wearing a snowy, white turban and even in my wildest dreams he had never been anything but Schmitty, certainly nothing like Swami Schmidt. I sat up and yawned mightily. That cleared away some of the tag ends of sleep, and the turban came down to size. It was only a copiously bandaged head.

"You ought to be in the hospital, in bed," I said sternly.

"After nine? Nobody should be in bed after nine. Do you want to go see Beryl Tucker with me?"

I got up. I tried Beryl Tucker on my memory and she rang no bell.

"What about concussion?" I asked.

Schmitty laughed. "The doctors say they can't be positive this soon," he said. "So I say I'm okay."

"You're being a dope. You should have stayed in the hospital, in bed."

"I stayed in bed all night. No good in overdoing it. I'll fix coffee while you dress. Breakfast will be ready by the time you are."

He went off to make coffee. I shaved and showered. I was dressing before I got around to thinking that the inspector had let himself into my apartment. Ordinarily that would have been nothing. He's had a key to my place for years just as I've had one to his. But the boys down at Homicide West had spoken only of the inspector's watch and billfold. They'd said nothing about his keys and the thought of them had never entered my head.

"Your long, narrow friend left you your keys," I said.

The inspector nodded. "You were in good form last night," he said. "Description of the man, license number of the car. That was good going."

"I could have done better."

I told him about the trouble I'd had with the hackie. He shrugged it off.

"The guy pushes a hack for a living," he said. "For what he's making you can't ask him to be a hero, too."

I remembered there had been a dame. I'd filed her away for later consideration.

"Whom we going to see?" I asked.

"Beryl Tucker."

"Beryl has a murder?"

"Beryl has a Cadillac."

I tooled off the license number. Schmitty nodded.

"Heard from Beryl?" I asked.

"Not a word. I had them save her for me, too." He pushed away from the table. "Let's figure it. Suppose Beryl was driving her Cadillac last night. She happens to see me get conked. She's a woman alone. She gets scared. What does she do?"

"Everything she didn't do," I said thoughtfully. "She takes off, forgetting about even waiting for the light. She didn't do that. When I looked back after we'd crossed with the light, the Caddy was still there."

"Paralyzed with fright," Schmitty said. "All thumbs. Had trouble starting."

"Okay. So she finally got rid of all the extra thumbs and she did get started. Sooner or later she sees a cop or she's far enough away to stop and use a phone. She gets in touch with the police."

"Uh-huh, and she didn't do that. I'm going to ask her why. But there's another possibility and a better one. Dames who live in the Sixties between Park and Lex, the way she

does, don't often drive themselves down into Chelsea, especially that time of night. A dame like that could have been heading for the Village even that late, but she would be using Fifth Avenue or the West Side Drive. The possibility is that she wasn't alone."

I caught it. "A man," I said, "who isn't Mr. Tucker. So one quietly leaves the scene of the crime and one hopes the poor man hasn't been hurt, but one certainly can't be expected to embarrass one's self by making any reports to the police."

Schmitty grinned. "Mr. Bagby," he said, "you are so understanding. Of course, there is another possibility. Let's suppose Beryl has a chauffeur. Let's suppose the chauffeur uses the car when Beryl isn't using it. Chauffeurs get caught doing that and they lose their jobs. A guy has to make a living. You can't expect him to risk his job over my broken head."

I caught that one, too, or I thought I did.

"Especially if he prowls the town in the boss' Caddy," I said. "He mugs a citizen here and there."

The inspector wouldn't go along.

"No," he said. "He would at least park it around the corner, and the guy you saw had the jerks. I doubt that Beryl would employ a chauffeur who had the jerks."

4.

I had been expecting an apartment. No matter how custom built the Cadillac, in Manhattan it won't suggest anything more than an apartment. With land values what they are on that narrow island, and with taxes and servants what they are everywhere, the town house seems to be going the way of the buffalo and the whooping crane.

When we drew up at Beryl Tucker's address, however, we found a neat, little, three-story job of white painted brick with neat rows of black framed, heavily draped windows and a black painted door punctuated with brightly polished brass. Beryl Tucker, it had begun to appear, would be a lady who could afford not only a super-Cadillac but taxes as well and probably even servants.

The inspector pressed the bell button. A starchy girl with a good, plain, well-scrubbed face opened the door. She gave us that challenging look you expect people to come up with if you are a stranger on their doormat. The look passed over me quickly and settled itself firmly on the inspector's impressive head bandage. Examining the bandage with unconcealed interest, she waited for us to state our business.

"We'd like to see Miss Tucker," Schmitty said.

"Who do I say is calling?"

The girl was evidently speaking the rehearsed formula and her voice took on a special sort of forbidding tone that went oddly with a bit of brogue. She would take our names to Miss Tucker, she was saying, but

she had no expectation that Miss Tucker would see us.

"Police department," the inspector told the girl. This very partial identification had a most extraordinary effect on her.

Her formality of manner dropped away from her and her rehearsed phrases flew out of her head. She gave us a big smile.

"Police?" she asked and now there was a warm cordiality that went perfectly with the bit of brogue. "And you standing out here on the doorstep. Come in off the street and sit down a while."

She took us into a little black and white satin hall. There was a flight of white painted steps with black balustrades supporting a white stair rail. There was black carpeting on the white steps and black carpeting on the hall floor. The walls were covered with white satin and the stuff was sort of quilted and it had black satin buttons studding it. That hall looked as though it had just been furnished that very moment. It looked so new and so untouched that I found it hard to believe that anyone had ever gone up or down the stairs.

The girl opened a door and helped Schmitty into a room of green and gilt paneling. She led him to a sofa. He looked doubtfully at the sofa's spindly legs.

"You can rest yourself," the girl said. "It's stronger than it looks."

Schmitty rested himself. I tried a chair. It also seemed to be stronger than it looked. It held me.

The girl went on through to a room at the back of the house, closing the door behind her. We waited.

After a while she came back to us. Her face was crimson and her eyes flashed wrathfully. "Miss Tucker said I should take care of you," she said.

"I'm sorry to make you do extra trips," the inspector murmured, "but you'll have to tell her that one of the policemen is Inspector Schmidt and that he's here on business with Miss Tucker and he is going to have to see her about it."

She brightened. She grinned and she even winked.

"Inspector?" she whispered. Tossing her head, she returned to Miss Tucker.

"This is an interview that's going to get off on the wrong foot," I said.

The inspector smiled, but it was a grim smile. "I won't mind a bit," he said, "if it was Beryl Tucker herself in the car last night."

When the door opened again, it was a man who came out to talk to us. He was a fine, juicy beef of a man who was so heavy through the shoulders that you didn't notice too much that he was also heavy through the middle. The pink oxford shirt and the pink and black striped tie looked almost conservative on this chap. It may have been because his face was so much pinker than either shirt or tie. It was that well barbered, well massaged pink you'll see over dry martinis in the men's bar at the Waldorf.

The inspector stood up. "Could it be that Miss Tucker is reluctant to cooperate with the police?" he asked. "I distinctly said I would have to speak with Miss Tucker."

With a confident smile the big boy lumbered toward the inspector. "Now, let's not be hasty, Inspector," he said. "I am a friend of Miss Tucker's. You know how it is, sir. A lady, the police. I just hoped I could handle it for her."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Schmitty growled. "This one you can't."

"You're here officially?"

"Officially."

"You have credentials?"

Schmitty nodded. He showed the man his credentials. The man inspected them and handed them back.

"Miss Tucker has asked me to represent her," he said. "I'm Brian Williams."

"Attorney?"

"No."

"Just a friend?"

At that point the door opened and Miss Tucker stood in the doorway. She was a lot of woman, tall and well constructed. She was wearing a black negligee, but she was sleekly groomed. She was a chestnut and she wore her hair in one of those short cuts that looks as though it just happened. She had a piece of toast in her hand and she had eaten some of it. She was the kind of woman who would make any man think of bedrooms, and she had that effect even when she came into the room. Not every woman makes the effect when she's chewing toast.

"Brian," she said. "Kathy's brought your eggs. You don't want them cold."

"Miss Tucker?" Schmitty was stepping into it.

With a gesture of weary annoyance she faced the inspector.

"You've taken me from my breakfast," she said.

"I'm sorry. We'll make it as fast as we can. Were you using your car last night?"

"Let me see. Was I? No, of course I wasn't."

"It might concern you then that your car was out of the garage last night."

"It might. Do you mind coming inside? We can go on with this while I finish my breakfast. I suppose you've already had yours?"

"Yes, thank you," Schmitty said.

"If you'd like a second," Beryl Tucker offered, as she led the way to the back room, "I'll have Kathy bring you something."

We declined. She settled herself at the breakfast table. Brian Williams joined her at it and addressed himself to his eggs.

"May I ask what this is all about?" she said.

"First I'd like to get the facts all straight," Schmitty said. "The car I'm talking about is a Cadillac." He reeled off the license number for her. "Is it yours?"

"It's my Cadillac. One of them."

Williams choked a bit and then had a small coughing fit. I couldn't make myself believe he had fallen afoul of a bone in his eggs. It was my hunch that he had choked on the lady's words.

"You have more than one Cadillac?" Schmitty asked.

"Two. That's more than one, isn't it?"

"You were using neither one of them last night?" the inspector began.

Brian Williams, who had recovered from his coughing spell, woke up at this point.

"Isn't there any of the other jam?" he asked. "The strawberry. I can't stand marmalade."

Beryl Tucker tinkled the silver bell that sat beside her coffee cup. Kathy came in, and Miss Tucker told her to bring Mr. Williams some of the strawberry jam. Then she turned to Schmitty again.

"I get it," she said. "Of course I get it. Just how do I know that you are from the police?"

"Police inspector, Beryl," Williams said. "Nothing phony about him."

Beryl Tucker shrugged. "All right," she said. She turned back to Schmitty. "You've had an accident," she said. "One of my cars may or may not have been involved. Any claims for damages you'd better take up with my insurance company. Don't come bothering me."

"I was not in an accident," Schmitty said calmly. "You know who had your car out last night?"

Kathy came in with a jar of strawberry jam set in a saucer. She set it down by Williams' plate and quietly left the room. But Beryl called her back in a sudden blazing anger.

The girl came running. The scene that followed was embarrassing. Beryl Tucker threw a tantrum. Her face had gone dead white and it was so tense with rage that the muscles under the skin around her mouth seemed to be standing out in relief.

I could hardly believe that such an outburst could have been occasioned by anything but the most insupportable of provocations and yet the misdeed that had loosed this storm was in my view fantastically trivial. The whole of Kathy's crime seemed to have been that she had served the strawberry jam to Williams in the jar.

I looked at the jam pot. It was cut crystal and it had a silver lid. The jar out of which Williams had been spooning the strawberry jam was not anything so splendid but it was notably inoffensive. It was a quite simple glass cylinder with an enameled metal screw top. I thought the top was rather pretty. It was black and it had one prim, plump strawberry painted on it. There wasn't a label on it to disfigure it.

As soon as Kathy had removed the offending jar, the lady looked at her watch and exclaimed at how late it was. Williams looked at his own watch and gulped the rest of his

coffee. He was gone by the time Kathy returned to serve the jam as the lady wanted it served.

Inspector Schmidt decided the time had come to set the lady straight on a couple of things. His explanations were curt, but they were clear and they were conclusive. He had no claim. He was not the victim of an accident. He had been assaulted and since her car had been spotted at the scene, he was seeking nothing but a witness.

The lady laughed. "Why didn't you say all that in the first place?" she asked. "Why all the hocus-pocus?"

Schmitty was patient with even that question. He gave her the time and the place. He told her quite frankly about his various suspicions.

Beryl gave the inspector a long, quizzical look. "I would like you to understand a couple of things," she said. "I am an independent woman, completely my own boss, answerable to no one. If I had been in the car last night, I would have no reason for saying I wasn't at that particular street corner at that particular time if I had been. Are you quite clear on that?"

"Quite clear. Now if you will just tell me who was using your car, we won't have to bother you any further."

She nodded. "Of course," she said. "If it was in use at all, Andrew Simms had it out. He borrows it whenever he wants it."

"Who is Andrew Simms?"

"A friend of mine."

"Where do we find Mr. Simms?"

She gave him the address. It was an address in West Twenty-Fourth Street, and the inspector noted it down dead-pan and without comment. It might have been that I was less successful in covering a slight start of astonishment. A tough block, close to that unfortunate corner of the inspector's, it made an interesting address.

But when we left we didn't go there at once. The inspector headed east, instead, toward the local precinct house, to see if Schmitty could pick up some background.

And there we got the news that a body had been found not two blocks from where Schmitty had been mugged. On the body had been found a length of lead pipe. Also on the body had been found Inspector Schmidt's wallet. The man had been an addict.

We headed for the morgue.

When we got there the attendant was ready for us. He took us down the line and rolled out the slab. The dead man was short, thin and disreputable. He wasn't Schmitty's assailant; he was only five feet and one inch tall. Schmitty didn't look as puzzled as I was by this turn of events, and it's possible that he was already beginning to put facts together. He got the ME on the phone and asked him to do the man in the morgue as soon as he could. Then we went across town to look for Beryl's friend, Andrew Simms.

5.

Simms wasn't home. This was not as much of a surprise to me as it might otherwise have been, because I didn't see how anyone could stay for long in the disinfected and ramshackle hotel he called home, according to Beryl Tucker. There was nobody else to answer any questions Schmitty might have cared to ask, so we pulled out of there and spotted the beat patrolman out in the street. He'd noticed the inspector's car and he'd been patrolling within sight of it. They'll often do that, just hang on within reach in case they can be of use. Inspector Schmidt thought he might use this one.

He asked him if he knew Andrew Simms. The cop tried but he couldn't make anything on the name. That didn't discourage Schmitty. The best of cops on a congested tenement district beat can't possibly know all his people and it will only be a smallish minority of them that he'll know by name. There was still the possibility that this boy would know our man by sight. Schmitty tried it that way.

"Sometimes he drives a big, new Caddy," Schmitty said. "He lives here and the Caddy, it's a honey, special body job."

The cop brightened. "Sure I know him," he said. "Down this way heaps like that don't come a dime a dozen. You want him?"

"I just want to talk to him. Know where I can find him?"

"Haycox's," the cop said. "It's a drug store. This guy, he works there. Lunch counter. He jerks sodas. It's just around the corner on the avenue."

The inspector laughed. "I was wondering how he got to have the use of that Cadillac," he said. "Now I know. The dame who lends it to him, I bet she can go in that drugstore any time and he'll give her an extra scoop of ice cream in her soda."

We got into the car and rolled down to the avenue and along that. Haycox's was where the cop said it would be. It was a smallish drug store and it was a bit dusty and old-fashioned looking. Schmitty parked and we went in.

There was only one man behind the counter. He was unpacking some bakery pies and setting them up under plastic bells on the counter. The way he moved, he looked like a man who knew his job. It wasn't that he was doing anything that asked for much in the way of skill or technique, but he went about it efficiently and neatly.

Rather on the slim, good-looking side, he gave every evidence of being a lad who worked at it. The curl in his dark hair didn't just happen and his neat, dark line of moustache would have to have been the product of a lot of careful trimming. I guessed him for somewhere in the early thirties but trying to look twenty-five. He had a hard-guy manner and I guessed that he'd cultivated that as carefully as he had

the moustache. I couldn't hold that against him. It wasn't a part of town where a man could get along very well looking soft and gentle.

We climbed up on a couple of the wire-backed stools before the counter.

"Andrew Simms," Schmitty said.

"That's me," the man told us.

"Were you using Beryl Tucker's car last night?"

"I guess that's my business," he said. "What are you having?"

"Answers," Schmitty said. "We're police."

"Okay. I had the car out."

A woman in blue jeans came in and hoisted herself up on a bar stool. Simms left us to turn to her.

"Hi, Mae," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Egg cream, the usual."

He nodded. "Yeah, chocolate," he said.

We waited around while he served her. Then he came back to us. "I had it out," he said again. "Any beef?"

"No beef. I want to know about between three and three-thirty this morning. Where were you then?"

"Driving around."

Schmitty named the intersection. He asked Simms whether he remembered being at that street corner.

"Yeah," he said, "I was there a while."

"Waiting for someone?"

"Not that time of night, I wasn't. I ran out of smokes. I parked and I went down the block to pick up a deck of Luckies. There wasn't anything open on the avenue that late. I had to go down the street."

"It's a borrowed car," Schmitty pointed out. "Anything happens to a car like that, you'd be jerking sodas the rest of your life and you couldn't even begin to pay for it. You need smokes. You drive down the block and you park in front of the place where you get them."

Simms put both hands flat on the counter and leaned toward Schmitty. He talked right into the inspector's face and he was putting on the tough manner, but big. He put it out that he was beginning to get sore.

"I left the car locked," he said. "Nothing happened to it. One-way street — so I couldn't take the car in. I'd have had to go clear around the block to come in. So I park and I walk down. Now I'm going to ask a question. What's it to you?"

Schmitty told him. Simms relaxed. He might even have been amused. He waited until Schmitty had finished.

"Look," he said. "If I was there when you got it, you wouldn't have got it. Muggers pick up guys they can catch alone on the street. They don't work when there's anybody to watch them. Everybody knows that. The whole thing happened, I guess, while I was down the block getting my smokes."

"This place where you bought the smokes — what kind of a place was it, open that time of night?"

"All night lunchroom. I think it was called Larry's."

"They'll remember you came in, then."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I happen to remember the place. No reason they should remember me."

6.

We pulled out of there and we went around to Larry's place. Nobody remembered Andrew Simms. "Lots of guys," Larry told us, "come in here all the time. I should remember every last one?"

He had a point, as I told Schmitty when we were on the street again.

"Maybe," Schmitty growled. "Maybe not."

We pulled out of there and the inspector drove west a couple of blocks. When he pulled in to the curb and parked again, he had me wondering what he might be after. It was a street that meant nothing to me; and, after even the quickest look at it, I was ready to say that it was a street that couldn't have meant anything to anyone.

Corner to corner, avenue to avenue, the whole length of the street on both sides was dead. Cars did come rolling through, the usual midday traffic of any Manhattan side street, but that was it. There any similarity to other streets ended. It was the usual thing in this part of town for life, spilling over from the overcrowded tenements, to spread all over the sidewalks, but here the sidewalks were empty. They were empty for the most obvious of reasons. The tenements that lined this street on both its sides had no life in them. They were blank faced, boarded up, empty.

Following the inspector out of the car, I remembered the story. There were several blocks in there that were to come down for a slum-clearance project. Over a long period of time the housing people had been moving families out, finding them other places to live, clearing the area for demolition. The buildings, shockingly decrepit and hazardous even for that neighborhood of decayed housing, had been condemned; but the people, who had lived there, accustomed to these slimy hovels, had not been easily moved.

More than half of the buildings had still been occupied when one night the inevitable had happened. Fire had swept the block. Flames, mushrooming up the stairwells, had taken the rotted timbers like so much tinder. It had been a bad night in the hospitals and a bad night at the morgue, but the fire had done what the best efforts of the housing people could not do. Even in those houses which the fire hadn't touched, the tenants, up to that time recalcitrant about moving, had been frightened into a more compliant attitude. The whole street had been emptied in a matter of weeks. Now it waited for demolition. It had been waiting for the better part of a year.

The spot where the inspector had

chosen to park was in the part of the block the fire hadn't touched. You could see the difference readily. The brickwork was gray with grime. Further down the street it was smoke-blackened. The windows were all broken and the glass hung in shards from the window frames. Where the fire had been the windows stared emptily. There was no glass at all in them. Here the windows were dark. Where the fire had been, light showed through the window openings because there the walls were only brick shells. The roofs had collapsed and the sunlight poured down freely into the gutted interiors.

The way Schmitty acted, however, we might have been going to pay a call. He walked along looking for house numbers.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Our body," he explained. "The body that had my billfold. I want a look at the stretch of gutter where it turned up."

"What for?" I asked.

"For whatever it's worth," Schmitty murmured. His mind was more on the house numbers than it was on my questions.

They weren't easy to find. They had been painted on the doors and there wasn't much paint of any kind left on any of those doors. Furthermore the doors had all been boarded over and in boarding them up the workmen had given no thought to leaving street addresses visible. They hadn't expected that anyone would ever care again about which of these rotting carcases had been 721 and which 723.

I thought back to the memo we'd seen at the police station. It had given a house number for the place in front of which the body had been found. I had taken no special notice of the number. That the inspector had troubled to notice it and remember it didn't astonish me. It's one of the differences between Schmitty and myself, a difference that, putting before his eyes and mine exactly the same group of facts, all of the same evidence, makes him work it into a logical pattern that leads to a logical conclusion and leaves me limping along behind him in panting amazement.

"Which house was it?" I asked.

"No. 735."

"A lot of good that does us. The numbers are all worn off the doors or boarded over."

"Not all of them."

Schmitty stopped in front of a doorway and showed me where a stretch of door showed above the boarding and on it a part of a number showed, enough so that one could make out a seven.

I laughed that off. "What good's that?" I asked. "We know it's the 700 block."

Schmitty explained and, as to my humiliation all too frequently happens, he was patiently explaining the self-evident.

"On 735," he said, "the number will be readable. The report gave the number and that means that the cop

who found the body was able to read it. If he could read it, it's there to read and we can read it, too."

I sighed. "Plain as the nose on my face," I said. "Except that I was too dumb to see it."

Schmitty stopped and looked hard at one of the doorways. I looked with him. This one was boarded all the way to the top of the door. If there was a number on that one, there wasn't the first chance of seeing it.

"Not as dumb as all that," he said. "The cop didn't see the number at all, but it's his beat and he knows these houses. He remembered from the time when the numbers were there to read and he put 735 in his report. He put it in because he knew it without thinking that it wasn't too much good since nobody else could find it. This will be the one."

It was nice to be able to think that I hadn't missed the self-evident that time but I couldn't take much pleasure in the reassurance since here quite obviously would be something else I was missing.

I didn't try to pretend. "Why this one?" I asked. "How do you know?"

"Because everything beyond is burned out and there'll be no numbers on them anyone could read. This one has other clues."

He pointed them out to me. There were cigarette stubs on the steps and they were fresh enough for the paper on them still to be white. On this dead street it was a good bet that the meat-wagon boys had been smoking those cigarettes and had flipped away the butts before they picked up the stretcher.

We went up the steps and the inspector examined the boarded up door. I didn't even try to imagine what he might be hoping to find there. To me it looked hopeless. That derelict, full of dope, had crawled away into this abandoned area and curled up in the gutter in front of this house to sleep it off. He hadn't slept it off. He had died. I was wondering what possible significance there could be in the fact that it had been in front of this particular doorway or even on this particular street.

I watched while Schmitty took hold of the boards on the door and pulled. It seemed the most futile sort of fumbling around and even when the boards moved I couldn't see that he was proving anything. They moved and the door came with them.

The boards were nailed to the door but if they had been fixed to the door frame as well, as they should have been, the nailing there had come loose. The door, boards and all, swung open.

A man who had been crouched just inside the door came unbalanced when the door swung away from him. He fell forward breaking his fall with his hands. Schmitty grabbed for him but the man scuttled away into the house. Schmitty jumped after him; and, hesitating only a moment in the face of the chill, rank odor of the rotting place, I followed.

The man hit the stairs and scrambled to his feet. It was dark on those stairs. Light came in through the open door and threads of it filtered through boarded up windows but it wasn't enough to make more than a dim sort of gloom.

The man was a shadowy figure on the stairs and his movements, although jerky, were lightning quick. As he ran up the steps, taking them two at a time, his body seemed to unfold in the shadows and to elongate itself. The long arms swung crazily. The long, thin neck and the long narrow head seemed to be reaching up higher and higher, as though they were pulling the long and thin and badly coordinated trunk and limbs after them.

It was a crazy flight of stairs. The steps had sagged and they canted sickeningly away from the horizontal. The stair rail, sagging with them, was warped and split. The whole staircase shook and shivered as the man ran up the steps.

Schmitty hit the steps behind him and was starting up when the splintering noise seemed to rip through the whole house. With a frightened scream the man took a great leap forward; and, as he jumped, a whole section of stair rail twisted loose and sagged outward. Puffs of dust exploded out of the steps and then the dust came in a cloud as the whole staircase pulled away from the wall, sagged a moment, and with a crackling roar dropped in a rapidly accelerating collapse.

I reached forward and caught the inspector by the shoulders. Putting all my weight into it I threw myself backward. I fell and brought him down on top of me. The whole flight went, and we choked on dust.

The inspector scrambled to his feet; and, rolling back out of his way, I jumped to mine. The dust stung our eyes and choked us, but looking up through it, we saw our man. He was hanging by his hands from the edge of the floor above. With a great wrench he twisted his body upward and got a foot through the balustrade that guarded the stairwell. He was pulling himself up.

7.

Without any interference from us it was touch and go whether the man could possibly make it safely. When the stairs had gone under him and he had jumped for it, the hold he had caught had been at best a precarious, fingertip deal. As the dust began to settle, he had started to improve that hold but the improvement was highly questionable. He had grasped the second-story balustrade and he was trying to pull himself up to get astride it.

It was a trick that under any circumstances would have taken more than a little doing. Under these particular circumstances there seemed little chance that he could bring it off at all. The balustrade was anything but solid and when he put his weight on it, it gave sickeningly.

Actually, just then the thought never entered my mind that there was any danger that the man might get away. The question was whether he would be able to save himself at all. Ordinarily the inspector could have ordered the man to stop, could have told him to drop, could have threatened to shoot. Here there was no stopping and there was no way the man could drop safely. We couldn't get anywhere close enough so that we could grab his legs and help him lower himself. There wasn't even room to snap off a shot without killing the man.

Right below where he dangled was heaped the wreckage of the collapsed stairway. It was a tangled mass of splintered wood and everywhere there stuck out of it the split ends, like so many rough-hewn spears. For the man to have let go his hold and dropped would have been certain death and it would have been death by the most horrible mangling.

The man was doing the one thing he could do. We stood and watched his struggle. Bit by bit, he did pull himself up. The balustrade creaked and groaned under his weight but miraculously it held. He scrambled astride it. Only then Schmitty drew his revolver.

"All right, mister," he said. "Stay where you are. We'll get an emergency truck over to bring you down."

The man hit the floor with both feet, and in the same motion he scuttled away from the balustrade. I wanted to think that it was just an involuntary recoil away from that edge where he had been dangling so precariously, but it was obvious that it was at least as much a flight from us.

Muttering, Schmitty put away his revolver. Now the man was out of sight. To fire at him would merely be to waste ammo. The inspector had never had a chance for one of those skillful shots that puts a bullet in the fleshy part of the thigh, the sort of shot that will bring a man down but never harm him irreparably.

We went out to the street and Schmitty used his car radio to call for reinforcements and also for the emergency squad. When he was through giving his orders I had a try at cheering him up.

"He can't get away," I said. "No possible way he can get down."

Schmitty shook his head. "No," he said. "He's away. He can't come down but he can go up. Up to the roof and over one roof or two or as many as he likes and down in another building. The boarding on the door didn't loosen itself. He's been using these houses probably ever since they were vacated. He can come out anywhere up and down the street or he can go down through a tenement on the next street and lose himself in the crowds on whatever avenue he likes."

"He's your man?" I asked.

For a silent moment the inspector

looked at me in complete exasperation. Then he came out of it and laughed.

"Baggy," he said, "are you asking me? You saw the man last night. I didn't."

"He's the right height and the right build," I said, "and he moves the way the man last night moved."

Schmitty nodded. "I think it will do," he said. "This one's a hophead. The one last night probably was. The dead one who had my billfold looks as though he was another. His body turns up outside that door. Our friend turns up just inside the same door. Once we catch up with him, we should be able to put all that and your description together to add up to something."

"The dead man looks like he was another?" I asked. "I thought that was open and shut. The usual needle punctures and all."

"Yes," Schmitty said, as the emergency truck and the squad cars came swinging into the street. "All that makes him look as though he'd been a hophead, but the ME will tell us for sure about the punctures."

"But what else could they be?"

"On a guess," Schmitty said, as he crossed the sidewalk to take up the briefing of the men he'd called for, "they could mean somebody had been keeping him drugged over a period of time or they could mean that he'd been sick and someone had been doing some amateur doctoring on him."

The inspector gave the men the set-up and he turned the block over to them, asking them to do what they could with it, but at the same time making it clear that he appreciated the difficulties and wasn't asking the impossible.

The men from the local precinct he held back for a few minutes. To them he gave a detailed description of the jerky acrobat we had surprised behind that door. It was an admirable description, but before he had even finished one of the patrolmen stepped forward.

"We've got a neighborhood character, Inspector," he said. "Answers that description. An addict, called Halfhand Ackerman. But you'd figure the description would say something about his hand. It's what people notice right off."

"Halfhand," Schmitty said thoughtfully. "Mutilated finger on the right hand. It's the forefinger. The rest of his hand looked all right but there was a facial scar. Drooping lower eyelid on the left eye. Looked like an old knife thing to me."

"That's him," the cop said. "Halfhand Ackerman."

How I could have missed on the hand made me wonder. I'm not blind. I tried to rebuild the picture of the man as he had been struggling to get over that balustrade. The picture came and in it I did find some comfort. I remembered how he had been reaching up with his leg trying to hook a foot through the balustrade. But it hadn't been his hold that worried me, it had

been whether or not the rotten, old wood would hold up under his weight. I could have given an exact description of the railing. I had missed the finger.

"Do you know where he lives?" the inspector asked.

"He has a room . . ." the cop started, then remembered and corrected himself. "He had a room, Inspector. I was looking for him only a couple, three days ago and he wasn't there. He don't live there any more."

"What did you want him for?"

The patrolman took his uniform off and scratched his head. "I don't know I can even put a name to it, Inspector," he said, "unless you'd call it loitering maybe. There's this lady — she has a little store down on the avenue. She got mad because he was hanging around outside the window. She don't like people hanging around outside the store because they keep the sun off the window."

"She ask you to move him on?"

The patrolman shook his head. "No, Inspector," he said. "Not exactly. You see, I was coming by there and she called to me. She told me how Halfhand had been hanging around in front of her window but he wasn't there when I came by, so there wasn't nobody I could move along for her. But she described him and I knew it was Halfhand so I figured if I could find him, I'd talk to him and maybe stop any future trouble. You know what I mean, Inspector."

Schmitty let it drop. It still seemed an odd little incident but it was obvious that he had milked it for all the cop had to give him. "Where did he have this room?" Schmitty asked.

The patrolman gave him the address. I assumed that the inspector had just asked without being particularly interested because he didn't make a move to write it down. It was as though he had suddenly gone off down some trail of his own thoughts.

We went back inside for a look at operations. "He's been holed up in here," one of the men told Schmitty. "Room right on the ground floor. You can see where he's been."

It was the best news anybody had to offer, so we went in to look. The room made my flesh crawl. It was in semi-darkness, a darkness sparsely relieved by the threads of sunlight that filtered in through the cracks between the boards that covered the windows.

At the time when these houses had been emptied of their tenants the room had probably been little more than barely habitable. Months of boarded-up neglect had dropped it the rest of the way to absolute filth and decay. Rats had been at the rotting wall paper. Dust lay thick over everything, but dust was the least of it. There was a stench that bespoke a filth so horrible that it made nothing of the dust.

In the corner of the room there was something I can hardly call a

bed. It was more like a nest, a dirty, lumpy, matted pile of torn mattress felt, excelsior, shredded newspaper and rags. On top lay the wreckage of what had once been a man's tweed overcoat. It was jumping and crawling with vermin.

Inspector Schmidt walked over and picked the coat up. "Take it in," he said. "I have a hunch about it."

I had a hunch on my own. Mine was that if the inspector went on handling that stuff, he was going to have to go some place where he could burn his clothes and have himself deloused. But the inspector went right on grubbing avidly in filth.

He came up with a small glass vial and a small paper carton. He seemed even happier with these little objects than he had been with the ghastly coat.

The vial was empty except for a few drops of stuff that clung to its walls. The label said penicillin and streptomycin. The little box was similarly labeled and it was obvious that the vial had come in the box.

8.

By the time we were through with those items and with the room, it was mid-afternoon and we'd had no lunch. I didn't want any. I was still carrying the stench of that room around in my nostrils and it was making me feel as though I would never eat again.

When Schmitty suggested food, therefore, I countered with the suggestion that we go back to the hospital and renew his turban. It took a little convincing, but we did get down there, and the half-hour at the hospital put him in extraordinarily good spirits. For one thing it had been an opportunity to get off his feet and take his shoes off, a form of relaxation that will always do wonders for his state of mind. And to top this off, he convinced the doctors to replace the turban with a small, neat patch of bandage. It was a handsome bonus.

He left the hospital full of energy and ideas. I had won myself more than a reprieve. He had quite forgotten about eating. We got in the car instead and loafed down the avenue.

Schmitty headed for the theological seminary and he parked alongside the iron fence that marks the boundary of the seminary grounds. The building itself is a pretty depressing old pile, but its grass and trees work the magic that belong to grass and trees everywhere.

The inspector wanted to telephone. He went across the avenue to a stationery store that had a telephone booth in it. I didn't go with him. I wanted to stay as close as I could to that grass, as close as I could and as long as I could.

After a while I lit a cigarette. I was completely relaxed and almost asleep by the time the inspector came back. He wasn't smiling but he had that look on his face that said he felt like breaking out in a grin.

I yawned. "Whom did you call?" I asked.

"The ME. You know that killing I was working on?"

"Mugging victim over by the docks?"

"Uh-huh. That one. He died of a fractured skull but the ME hadn't liked it from the first. It never looked right to him."

"I can understand that," I muttered. "I don't want ever to reach the place where a fractured skull could look right to me."

"Not that way," Schmitty said. "There was stuff wrong with the guy no fractured skull could explain. Now they know. That guy was the next thing to dead before he was slugged. It was a murder that just got in under the wire. He was a dying man without it."

"Dying of what?"

"Tetanus. That's lockjaw, you know."

"So?" I said.

"You've got to have the rest of it," Inspector Schmidt said. "The ME has just finished doing the stiff who had my billfold. This one also died of lockjaw. How do you like that?"

I could see that he expected it of me that I should like it just fine, I made a good try, but I was just being obliging. For me nothing was happening.

"Epidemic?" I asked.

Schmitty waved that away. "It takes more than two cases to make an epidemic," he said. "I'm satisfied with the connection. Also lockjaw isn't any very quick death. It lays you low for quite a while before you're dead. So it means that the one down by the docks wasn't any simple mugging. When he was creased he was already out cold."

I had my first glimmering. "He would have been lying desperately sick in that empty lot and anybody who wanted to roll him could have rolled him and he was in no condition to cry out or make a fight."

"He wasn't even conscious."

"I shuddered. "Pretty horrible," I said. "More than average horrible."

"Yes," Inspector Schmidt agreed, "but also more than average interesting, especially when you put it together with this second one. He was dead of it this morning and that means that he was so far gone with it all last night that he couldn't possibly have been up and around to slug me on street corners."

"Oh, that," I said. "We had that figured just on his size. Halfhand Ackerman slugged you and maybe this man had your billfold because he did business with Ackerman."

Schmitty shook his head. "Not with a case of lockjaw, he didn't," Schmitty said. "He was dying. Any time last night he was too far gone to have been doing business with anybody."

9.

Gradually I was growing used to the idea of eating. I didn't notice the

change immediately. It took foods and the aromas of foods to awaken me to it. We went on along the avenue and found the little shop the cop had told us about, the one where the woman had made the complaint about Halfhand. It was a tiny shop. In a town where real estates frontages run pretty much to a standard twenty feet or multiples thereof, it was freakishly small. The show window was a six-foot square and alongside of that there was only a narrow door.

All that there was in the way of a sign was a name lettered on the panel of the door. The name was odd. In its own very different way it was quite as odd as was Halfhand Ackerman.

Mrs. Comfort Prince.

Behind the bright and spotless glass of her window, Mrs. Comfort Prince had arranged no display. There was a terraced arrangement of low steps which filled the whole window to a height of about two feet. These terraces were covered with shallow enamel pans of cooked fruit.

Through the upper part of the window we could see into the shop. The shelves were filled with little glass jars of all colors. There was a bit of a counter and behind it sat a bit of a woman bent over her work. Neat white hair; neat blue and white starched cotton; a smooth, elderly, country face — this would have to be Mrs. Comfort Prince herself.

Inspector Schmidt opened the door and I was following him in. It was at that moment that I knew my appetite was back.

Mrs. Prince spoke without raising her eyes from the task in which she appeared to be completely absorbed.

"Would you mind very much," she said, "throwing your cigarette away before you come in or else waiting outside till you have finished it? I've known the gooseberry and the quince to pick up just the faintest taint of tobacco. The others don't. They are more robust, but the gooseberry and the quince are a worry to me."

I threw away my cigarette and came in and shut the door after me. She had the counter covered with black enamel jar tops. On each was painted a little red apple transfixed by an oversized clove. She finished another jar and set it with the rest to dry. She carefully cleaned her paint brush and set it aside, only then turning to us.

"Mrs. Prince," Schmitty began. "I'd like to ask you some questions."

She laughed. "Oh, not one of those public opinion surveys? I know my fruits and my sun ripening and otherwise I'm the world's worst ignoramus. I don't have any opinions about anything."

Schmitty laughed with her. "No," he said. "This is a police matter." He introduced himself. "You made a complaint a couple of days ago. Something about a man who was loitering in front of your place."

She sighed. "Oh, yes," she said.

"That. I was terribly upset about the man, but he hasn't been back since, so that's all right."

"Good, but would you mind telling me about it?"

"It was nothing really. He would get in front of the window and stand in the sun, and you understand I can't allow that. The sun is my oven."

She explained. Her jams and jellies and preserves were slow cooked by sun-heat. She said it was the most troublesome method but that it was necessary because it accounted for the perfect flavor, the perfect color and clarity. Even such a narrow shadow as Halfhand Ackerman would have thrown could endanger the success of her sun cookery.

Inspector Schmidt peppered her with questions, drawing from her an account of that afternoon in as close detail as she could recollect. It hadn't been the first time that Ackerman had been loitering near the shop, but it was by all odds the most annoying. She had had several customers and she kept having to break off what she was doing to go out and shoo Ackerman away from the window. After an hour of it she had been ready to scream.

Even though it was more than a week later when she met Officer Kerrigan on the street and she had not seen Halfhand in the interval, she had still been worrying that the man might return and spoil another afternoon for her. She had spoken to Kerrigan.

"Now I want you to promise me something," the inspector said.

"Certainly, Inspector."

"Next time he turns up, afternoon or morning, sun or no sun, bothering you or not, you just leave him alone. Don't go out. Just pick up your phone and call the police station." He wrote the number down for her and handed it to her. "Keep that handy," he said earnestly.

"Just because he's been loitering . . ." I could see that she was doing an about-face on us. She was beginning to feel sorry for poor Halfhand Ackerman.

Schmitty smiled at her. "Mrs. Prince," he said. "I want to keep him off your window if I can, but that's secondary. I have something else I want to talk to him about." He indicated the patch of bandage on his head. "We met last night, this man and I. He gave me this."

"Oh," she said. "Oh. Of course, Inspector."

It was after we pulled out of there that we went around to eat. It was a bad comedown after Mrs. Prince's place, a joint down the street from Homicide West. I skipped the whole jam shop deal and, going back to the two lockjaw victims, I tossed my questions at the inspector.

"Look," I said. "Somebody seems to have a specialty that runs to fooling around with guys who are dying of lockjaw. How do you make sense of it?"

"By not leaving out large hunks of the pattern," Schmitty said. He

had taken his shoes off and was easing his feet while he ate. No part of the inspector has as sharp a memory of the beat-pounding beginnings of his brilliant career as do his feet. He rarely misses an opportunity to shed his shoes even if only briefly.

"What hunks?" I asked.

"Both men were users."

"I'm still looking for sense."

"Heroin."

"I didn't think you meant tobacco."

"Now, heroin. It's usually cut."

"Right. Almost always with dirt."

"Are you still looking for the sense of it?"

I was, but I ate a while, searching my own mind. Nothing happened.

"Yes," I said finally. "I'm still looking."

Schmitty grinned. "Okay," he said. "Let's think about tetanus for a while, lockjaw. You get antitetanus shots when the skin is broken and dirt gets in the wound, because a lot of dirt is tetanus-infected. Heroin is cut with dirt. It is taken hypodermically. The needle breaks the skin and the dirt is injected with the heroin."

I got it then. But there were still questions. "Where does Halfhand Ackerman come in it then?" I asked.

"Also a user."

"No symptoms of lockjaw when last we saw him."

"No, but he was close to our second lockjaw case. The room, the lousy bed, the penicillin-streptomycin vial. I'm betting that the second lockjaw case died in that room."

I nodded. "And the first man?" I added.

"How would it be if Halfhand was detailed to take care of these lockjaw cases, keep them away from doctors or cops or what have you? He's paid off with a supply for himself, but he doesn't like the duty. He shortens it by killing a guy who's taken too long to die — the first man — but the boss doesn't like that. Then Halfhand needs money to get his stuff and he takes me on."

"When he goes through your wallet he sees he's got a bear by the tail," I put in. "He lets go by planting your billfold on the other tetanus case."

Schmitty shook his head. "He didn't plant my watch on the dead man. If he's kept the watch, he still has the bear by the tail."

A couple of the boys from Homicide West had come in for coffee. One of them came over to us.

"Hello, Inspector," he said. "Have you heard the news about that fancy Caddy Mr. Bagby spotted last night?"

"What's with that?" Schmitty asked.

"It blew up this afternoon. Soda jerk from right around here, Andy Simms, he went to the garage and started to take it out. Stepped on the ignition and bang — no Cadillac, no soda jerk."

"Killed?"

"Sure. Dynamite and the detonator wired to the ignition. Amateur trick, but it always works."

10.

It was a four-story building. There was a two-car garage at ground level and alongside the garage door there was another that led to a stairway. Upstairs, it was small apartments. On either side there were big apartment houses. One of these looked very new. The other was maybe fifteen to twenty years old. It wasn't showing its age much. Both of these apartment houses had windows in the side walls, windows that looked down on the roof of the little garage deal.

If you know the town and you've seen it grow, a layout like that explains itself. The little garage building would once have been attached to some millionaire's mansion. Garage downstairs, servants' quarters above and the whole thing tacked on to something that had probably looked like the Palace at Versailles. The big apartment house goes up alongside it and it's a fine location because the tenants can have a free outlook over the mansion roof. Then the mansion is sold and another big apartment deal goes up. The garage is left between. Somebody in the neighborhood, like Beryl Tucker, snatches it up. She has the luxury of keeping her cars right handy. She fixes the servants' quarters over into pretty little apartments and, with rents what they are in the East Sixties, the whole deal breaks even for her or close enough to make it good business. A thing of that sort does take dough but, more than that, it takes the luck of having that very special development happening at hand.

The body had been taken away, but the Caddy was still there, or what remained of the Caddy was there. It was a pity. The thing was a twisted, shattered mess. The fingerprint boys were working on it and the inspector checked on what they were doing. He was most emphatic in his instructions to them. He didn't want anything skipped. Any surface of that wrecked heap that had survived the explosion he wanted covered for prints. He didn't care what part of the car it was. He wanted the whole job done. Having disposed of that, he looked around the garage. There wasn't much to see. The place was considerably scarred up. Flying hunks of Cadillac had done that. There was a small door at the back and, like the big double doors to the street, it also had been blown out. It gave on a pretty stretch of garden and I was thinking that it was very much like the garden we had seen through the window behind Beryl Tucker's breakfast table, when Schmitty carried it the extra step.

"Pretty neat," he said. "She just goes out the back door of her house, across her back yard, and she's in her garage."

I had already ticketed the thing as convenient but I hadn't spotted just how convenient it was. This wasn't a back garden like Beryl's. It was her back garden.

Schmitty turned to the lieutenant of detectives who was standing by.

"I suppose you've talked to the maid," he said. "Will that be Kathy, a gal who has a soft spot for cops?"

"She's probably lost the last of it by now, Inspector," the lieutenant said grimly. "We've been working on her story."

"What is her story?"

"She let him into the garage. It's kind of complicated, Inspector."

Schmitty said he was ready for complexities. The lieutenant let us have them. Some of it we already had, the fact that the dead man had been a friend of Beryl Tucker's and that she had been giving him the use of one of her Cadillacs whenever he wanted it. It was evident that the lieutenant had been finding that a bit odd, but it was only natural that he should. We'd found it peculiar at the very start and it had grown very much more peculiar as we'd gone into it, seeing the place where Andy Simms worked, the sort of lad Andy Simms had been, the job he'd held down, the place where he had lived. The lieutenant, of course, knew nothing of all that; and, since the inspector was doing the listening, the inspector didn't bother the lieutenant with any of these additional details.

The story the lieutenant had to tell us was complicated enough without them. This deal that had given Simms the use of the car whenever he wanted it had been implemented by a key to the garage.

"I guess he was the boy friend, Inspector," the lieutenant said. "It seems he also had a key to the house. At least he had the keys till today, but today they weren't any good any more. You see, only today the Tucker dame had the locks changed."

"Ex-boyfriend?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "Not the way the maid tells it, sir," he said. "Her story is this Simms fellow lost his keys. The whole key ring it was, garage key, house key, car key, any other keys he had. He called Miss Tucker and told her he'd lost them and she didn't like it a bit. She right away called a locksmith and had the locks changed. Then when she went out she left word with the maid that if Simms came around she was to let him into the garage. In fact, she took off before the locksmith had finished, but the instructions she left were that the girl was to give Simms the new keys."

"And Simms did come around," Schmitty said. "The gal gave him the new keys and he went out to the garage, got in the car, stepped on the starter, and blew himself up."

"That's about it," the lieutenant said. "The way she tells it, he came around and tried the garage door.

You see, he didn't know the locks had been changed. The locksmith had only just finished with them. Simms couldn't get in and the girl said he came around the block to the house. He rang the bell and he was mighty mad."

Schmitty sniffed. "Guys usually are mad when a dame's locked them out," he said. "He tries his key in the garage door and it won't work. He goes around to the house and tries the house key. Then he catches on that the locks have been changed on him and he burns up. He doesn't know he's on the list for a set of the new keys."

"That's the way the girl tells it, sir," the lieutenant said.

II.

The inspector questioned Kathy, of course, but her story was unshakeable. He tried his level best to keep her calm, but it was a losing battle, and we were all standing in the garage looking more, or less, confused, when Beryl Tucker came home.

It was easy enough to guess how it had been. She had driven into her street. The police lines were still up and, of course, she had stopped and had identified herself. She had a cop with her when she came in.

She stood in the big, street doorway and looked at the wreckage. It was really not too bad, nothing to what she would have seen if she had come home earlier. Even by the time we had turned up, Simms' body had been out of there. Now, however, the remains of that extra Cadillac of hers had also been towed away so that there wasn't much left to see.

"My garage," she said. "Which hurricane was this?"

She was wearing a black silk suit and a little black hat and she looked cool and beautiful. I can't say she didn't also look interested, even somewhat dismayed, but she had herself well in hand.

Kathy, at the sight of her, strangled a sob and ran toward her.

"Oh, Miss Tucker," she wailed. "Poor, poor Miss Tucker."

Beryl spoke to her sharply. "Don't be a fool," she said. "Go back to the house and put some ice on your face. You've been crying. You look horrible."

Kathy froze. Being told she looked horrible was more of a cold shock than ice on her face ever could be. She turned on her heel and left. Beryl waited until she was gone. Then she turned to Schmitty.

"I suppose she's been having hysterics, Inspector," she said. "They have hysterics if you as much as say boo to them."

Schmitty countered that one by suggesting that we go across to the house and that she sit down before he told her anything of what had happened. The suggestion seemed to startle her a bit but she took it. She took us in a door that led directly to the pleasant room where she had

been breakfasting that morning. She could not, however, have been more different than she was from what she had been at breakfast. Now she was gracious. She was the hostess. She offered us comfortable chairs. Only after we had refused did she pour herself a drink. She made it a stiff one, and took an appreciative sip from it before turning to the inspector.

"I'm all braced," she said. She smiled. "You can tell me now."

"Do you have any idea of what happened to your garage?" Schmitty asked.

"It looks as though a tornado hit it and since it can't have been that, I haven't the faintest."

"Explosion," Schmitty said.

She looked incredulous. "I've never heard of a car exploding sitting in a garage. On the road, in a collision, perhaps there . . ."

"The Cadillacs are insured, of course?"

"Naturally. But I was out in one and, since the garage is quite empty, Mr. Simms must have the other one out."

"We towed the other one away," Schmitty said, "what there was left of it."

"It blew up?" she said, realizing it at last. "How in the world did that happen?"

"You have no idea, Miss Tucker?"

"Now how could I possibly have an idea, Inspector?" she asked. "This is certainly the most peculiar, the most mysterious, the most unaccountable thing I've ever heard of."

"I understand you had all your locks changed today," Schmitty said.

She was impatient of that. "I did," she said, "but there's no connection, Inspector. That had nothing to do with this. Mr. Simms lost his keys, his whole key ring. I thought I'd play safe and have the locks changed and Mr. Simms said he'd take the car out and have the ignition lock changed so that the lost key wouldn't fit any more."

"Someone got into the garage, Miss Tucker."

"You mean the keys weren't lost? You mean they were stolen and somebody used them to get into the garage?"

"Something like that."

"Do you know who, Inspector?"

"I may soon. Another question, though. Did Mr. Simms have a single set of keys or did he have two sets, a duplicate in case he lost the one set or mislaid it?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask him, if it's important. He had the keys. I suppose he could have had a duplicate set made if he wanted them. Why? Is it important?"

"Kathy tells me that he came here today and tried to get into the garage and his key wouldn't work. He then came around to the house and she let him in and gave him a new set of keys."

Beryl shrugged. "Then he did have a duplicate set," she said. "Unless he had just mislaid them

and he found them again after he'd talked to me."

The inspector nodded. "Looks like it," he said. "One thing puzzles me, though. Kathy said he was angry that the locks had been changed. You told him you were changing the locks?"

Beryl scowled. "It appears that Kathy talks too much," she said angrily. "I suppose she also told you that Mr. Simms has a key to the house. I told you this morning that I do as I please, Inspector. I consider myself answerable to no one. My relations with Mr. Simms are my business. I would be grateful to you if you would pocket your curiosity about my business and get on with your own or with Kathy's."

"It seemed strange to me," Schmitty said, "that Mr. Simms should be angry when he found the locks changed since you had already told him you were changing them and had arranged with him to have the ignition lock changed as well."

She took a little sip at her drink and she laughed again. "You are a suspicious man," she said. "As a matter of fact I didn't tell him. You'd been here and I was curious about that business of yours last night. I asked Mr. Simms what that had been all about and he told me that he'd left the car parked at that corner while he went down the street for some cigarettes. Then he went on to tell me he'd lost his keys. It struck me that if he was going to leave the car parked that way, that time of night and in that neighborhood, it might be safer to do something about the ignition lock, now that his key was Lord knows where. I asked him to do it and I asked him not to be so careless again. It was after we were through talking that I began to think about the house and the garage and I decided I'd do the whole job, have all the locks changed, just in case. I can't see that it's at all important that Mr. Simms lost his temper with Kathy especially since he must be long since over it. But if it is important, Inspector, I suggest that you ask him about it. He's the one to ask, if you must ask anybody."

"Obviously," the inspector said, "except that I'm forced to ask you since I can't ask him."

"Why can't you? Don't tell me it's delicacy, Inspector. You haven't shown much delicacy in the questions you ask me."

"It isn't delicacy," Schmitty said. He went on with his questions. "Do you know anything about a man called Ackerman, Halfhand Ackerman?"

"I don't know him."

"You've never heard of him?"

"No."

Schmitty described our long, thin friend. He did a complete and detailed description and asked her if she knew a man of that description. She went back to the mocking tone and said that the man was

quite obviously not her type. She didn't know him. Schmitty pressed her and wanted to know if she had ever seen a man who answered that description. She said she hadn't and added that, if she had, she was quite sure she wouldn't remember. She would have no wish to remember any man who was that unattractive.

"I've never been hard up for men, Inspector," she said. "Heaven help me, I should never be that hard up."

"I thought you might have run into him some time when you were with Mr. Simms."

"Ask Mr. Simms about him, Inspector. I have no doubt that when Mr. Simms is working, people come into that place who look just like this man of yours."

"Miss Tucker," Schmitty said. "I can't ask Mr. Simms anything. Nobody can. Mr. Simms went into your garage and got into the car. He stepped on the starter and the car blew up. Mr. Simms is dead, Miss Tucker."

Her eyes widened and the glass slipped from her fingers. There was so much of her drink left that it made a huge pool on the rug at her feet.

12.

After a while Schmitty got her a doctor.

The doctor's first idea was giving her a sedative by mouth, but he had no luck. It wasn't that she was uncooperative. The doctor called it shock. She had tightened up to a point where it amounted to a paralysis. He brought out a needle and gave her a shot. The woman was numb, frozen.

We stayed around long enough to see that she was getting all the care that could be given her and we pulled out of there.

Even staying as long as we did was stretching it. While waiting for word from the doctor that his shot had taken hold and she was going to be all right, Schmitty had been finding stuff to busy himself with. He found the regular beat cop, a lad named Ryan, and talked to him. The boy was a mine of information, mostly about Beryl Tucker's life.

It was a life that had many men in it but the many seemed to come and go. There appeared to be only the two regulars, Andrew Simms and Brian Williams. Ryan knew of them by name, but mostly referred to them as the poor one and the rich one. Andrew Simms used the car all the time. He made himself free of the house entirely.

For all the way he'd acted, however, he'd had nothing except what Beryl Tucker had given him. The other one, Brian Williams, the rich one, was everything Andy Simms had never been. He was polite and he was pleasant. Just to see the way he acted, you would have thought that it was the other way around, that he was the one who was taking

and Simms was the one who was giving.

Ryan, however, knew better. Williams would take Miss Tucker out of an evening. The next morning Williams would leave the house. Before the day was out, there would be a new diamond bracelet or a new fur coat or Miss Tucker would have an enormous wad of money she would be going to the bank with. It was as plain as the nose on your face.

Then there would be the times Andy Simms would be there in the evening and also the next morning. And those days there was never any new diamond or any money to take to the bank. Nothing like that. There was Miss Tucker running the car around to the gas station to fill it up with gas and get it a lube job so it would be all ready for Andy Simms if he wanted to use it.

Patrolman Ryan had a word for the late Andrew Simms. Let's say Ryan called him a procurer. The word he actually used was shorter and less polite.

When the preliminary lab reports came in, Schmitty dropped the young officer. The reports covered what the lab boys had done with the garage, the remains of the Cadillac, and the various and sundry other items Schmitty had had them working over.

It was all prints. There were lots of prints on the pieces of the car. All but one set belonged to Andrew Simms. That one lone set, on the right front door, belonged to Halfhand Ackerman. The places where prints might have been left by someone who had wired the dynamite into the car had produced nothing. All those places had been wiped clean.

The fingerprint boys had also worked over the other stuff Schmitty had accumulated for them during the day. The length of lead pipe that had turned up with the body along with Inspector Schmidt's wallet had produce no prints at all. The penicillin-streptomycin box and the little vial for which it had been the container had shown up clear prints. The prints taken from the body of Andrew Simms had come into the files and had found waiting for them a match — the prints from the box and the vial.

That last pleased the inspector greatly. He had taken his shoes off for his session with Patrolman Ryan. Now he put them on again and he laced them up. He got on the phone and called the ME. The ME had looked for amateur efforts to deal with the tetanus. He had found them in the little man. Somebody had pumped morphine into him, but somebody had also pumped penicillin and streptomycin into him.

We pulled out of there at last and started going places. Our first stop was that mangy house we'd gone to in the morning when we'd first been looking for Andy Simms.

When we got there and he started scanning doorbells, he had me

stopped. If we knew anything about this case it was that Andy Simms wouldn't be there to answer any doorbells. Even when he fastened on the bell marked *Robinson* and noted the number of it, it took me a moment to catch up.

"Who's Robinson?" I asked.

"Mrs. Robinson. One-time landlady of Halfhand Ackerman."

I blinked. "This is where Simms lived," I said.

"Also where Halfhand used to live just before he stopped playing doorman over at the jam shop."

I was ashamed of myself. "You caught it right off that it was the same address."

"Certainly. Didn't you?"

13.

Mrs. Robinson was cold to us at first. When she found out that we were investigating the murder of one of her neighbors she was somewhat less cold. When she found out that we weren't interested in putting her in jail she became almost warm. She gave us everything she had on Simms and on Ackerman. She talked without a pause.

What she gave us on Simms ran pretty much to more of the same. It had to be separated out into what she actually seemed to know and what she was merely surmising. For my money, what she knew didn't add much to what we'd already had uptown and from other sources. What she surmised was provocative and the connection she furnished us between Simms and Halfhand Ackerman was the part of it that seemed to interest the inspector most. I can't say it bored me, but I also can't say it clarified anything for me.

"For a long time I couldn't figure it," she said. "How does a guy like Andy Simms get to know a dame, she owns a Caddy like that? All right. So it's a miracle altogether. Let that one go. So why does he keep his job at Haycox's and go on living here? Why? Why don't he quit and let her keep him altogether?"

Asking the question, she also answered it. The way she had it, Andy Simms, for all his big talk, had never been all that certain of the permanence of his tenure up in the East Sixties. He had taken no chances. He had never allowed himself to make the mistake of relying on his golden goose, Beryl Tucker. His basic expenditures had remained at the level he could manage on what he made at the soda fountain.

Having surmised that much, Mrs. Robinson went back to her original question. How did an Andy Simms find the golden goose? She thought she'd found the answer to that one and that was where Halfhand Ackerman had come into her story. She had rented a room to Halfhand. She had known he was a user, but that didn't bother her. As long as he paid his rent and made no trouble, she'd had a room for him.

One day there had been the start of what looked like trouble and she hadn't waited. She'd had his key that same day. She took no chances. The trouble had been with Andy Simms. One day there had been a terrible row upstairs in Simms' flat. All she could tell was that Simms was raising hell with somebody.

Then she'd heard the door slam and Halfhand had come down the stairs to his room. And later that day there had been another disturbance. Halfhand Ackerman had been outside the door to Simms' flat. He had been crying and shaking and clawing at the door panel. She had gone upstairs and tried to pull him away from the door, but she hadn't been able to do a thing with him.

"You know how them users are," she said.

"I know," Schmitty said. "He was getting it from Simms?"

She shook her head. "Not the way I had it figured," she said. "While I was up there, I guess Andy heard me outside with him. He opened the door and he took Halfhand inside. That quieted him down. A couple of minutes later Halfhand was out of there. When he came back, I got his key."

"But Simms wasn't his pusher?"

"It looked like he was," she said, "but I wasn't fooled none. I knew too much about Andy. He wasn't no user, and you get a pusher, unless he's a user himself, he makes dough, but plenty of dough. Guys, they make that kind of dough, they're on their own. They don't have to be taking stuff from no dame, or living in a dump like this otherwise. It don't fit."

The way she had it figured, Andy Simms had not been providing Halfhand with his narcotics but he had been providing the funds Halfhand had needed to keep himself supplied. Halfhand, begging outside Andy's door, had been begging for money to go and buy himself a shot.

"How did you figure that?" Schmitty asked.

"Why should he be giving Halfhand anything?" she asked. "Charity? Hah! What was he getting from Halfhand? That was easy. The junk."

"But Andy wasn't a user," Schmitty objected.

"The dame," she said. "The dame. A rich dame like that, she's a user. She runs on to a guy who can get it for her, all she wants. He can have anything he wants out of her so long as he keeps her supplied."

She doubled back on her story a bit to put in a detail she had omitted in telling us about the row in Andy's flat. She had heard one sentence clearly, in Andy's voice.

The voice had said: "What did you use to cut it with?"

That had been all. She made it fit with the rest. Halfhand had palmed off a bad deck of the stuff on Andy. Andy had stopped buying from

Halfhand and that meant no money for Halfhand to use in getting his own supply. The rest followed clearly.

"There's only one thing wrong," Schmitty said. "I've seen the dame. I saw her with her sleeves up. I saw a doctor give her a shot so she could get some sleep. Not junk, just a shot. She's no more a user than Andy was."

"Okay," Mrs. Robinson said. "Maybe it's her old lady or her brother — somebody like that she's got to get it for."

"Maybe," Schmitty said.

We pulled out of there and went upstairs. Schmitty had some keys he tried on Andy's door. We went inside. There weren't any quilted satin walls and the place didn't have that look that said the decorator had just finished with it a moment ago and nobody had even walked through it yet, but it did seem to have everything else. The furniture could have been lifted out of there and plopped down in Beryl's place and nobody would ever have known the difference.

Mrs. Robinson followed us upstairs. "I seen all this stuff come in," she said. "The dame gave it to him when she had her place fixed over. This is what she throws away. I'd like to see what she's got."

"She's got plenty," Schmitty said.

14.

After we left Mrs. Robinson, our next stop was Haycox's, the drug store for which Andy Simms had worked as a soda jerk. I didn't know what Schmitty would be looking for there, but when he fished the little box and vial he'd taken back, out of his pocket, I began to get a glimmering.

The owner of Haycox's identified the box and vial. It seemed he'd been missing stuff from his inventory, and the box and vial were part of his pharmaceutical stock. It seemed obvious to me that Simms would have been the thief, and I said as much to Schmitty when we had left the drug store.

"Sure," he told me. "But that isn't all. Think back to the first time we met Andy Simms."

"That cigarette alibi," I said. "It isn't worth a thing."

"Of course not. Friend Andy was mixed up in this, right up to his ears. And what else can you dig up?"

"Maybe Mrs. Robinson is right," I said. "Maybe Simms was giving dope to Beryl Tucker. Halfhand Ackerman would have friends, and if they got sick they'd need treatment. That would explain the two tetanus victims."

"How about the muggings?" Schmitty asked.

I tossed it around. I couldn't come up with anything.

"Okay," Schmitty said. "Let's go."

We headed for Homicide Squad West. The drive was a short one, and in that little time I turned the

facts over a few more times. I didn't have any better luck with them.

When we arrived Schmitty settled down to a bout of desk work. There was a full report from the fingerprint people. They were ready to make final statements on the wrecked Cadillac. No prints to indicate who had rigged the bomb. No prints anywhere that weren't either Simms' prints or those of Halfhand Ackerman. No Ackerman prints except those we had already heard about, the ones on the right-hand door.

The verminous tweed overcoat the inspector had picked up in the empty house had been given the works. They had been able to bring out some prints from the cloth and the verdict was that the coat had been worn by the little man who had had Schmitty's billfold in his pocket when he had died of lockjaw. There were also some Halfhand prints and some of Andy Simms' on the garment. These turned up, however, only at the hem, not in any place a man would take hold of a coat if he was putting it on or taking it off.

I commented on these prints along the hem of the garment. "What were they doing?" I asked. "Hooking a ride on the little man's coat tails?"

"They were using it as a blanket," the inspector said. "They were pulling it up to cover him up again after Andy would give him a shot of something else he'd swiped from the drug store."

There was also the Medical Examiner's report on the body of Andrew Simms. Simms had not been a narcotics user.

Schmitty went through all that stuff rapidly, almost absent-mindedly. He got it out of the way and turned to the material the boys had been accumulating on Brian Williams. In that he showed a keen interest.

When he had finished it and he handed it over to me to read, I found myself wondering what he could possibly have found in it to interest him so much. I thought it was fairly colorless, fairly average, fairly dull stuff. Beryl Tucker's Mr. Williams was a customer's man in a brokerage house. He had been married. He was divorced. His wife had asked no alimony and was receiving none. That last might have been a touch unusual but since the dope identified the lady who had been Mrs. Williams, it didn't need any explaining. It was a reasonably well-known name, a name that would appear in the newspapers now and again and always with the identification "beer heiress."

The rest of it was in pattern. It was standard, average, man-about-town stuff. Apartment in the East Eighties, a couple of fair to middling clubs, nothing spectactular.

There was something spectacular but it didn't come out of any paper on the inspector's desk. It came by phone from the precinct station house. The boys over there had had a call — sudden death in a

dormitory room over in the theological seminary. The call to precinct had come from a neighborhood doctor. He had been summoned to treat a man but on arrival he had found the man dead. Cause of death as near as he could make it from superficial examination had been morphine poisoning. The dead man had been an addict and, as the doctor was calling it, he was dead of a massive overdose.

"This one is Halfhand Ackerman, and they've found my watch on him," Schmitty told me after he hung up the phone. "Let's go."

"In the seminary?" I said. "What was he doing, ransacking some seminarian's room?"

Schmitty laughed. "For what? No, I have a hunch Halfhand died in a good cause. I think he's going to crack this whole case for us."

"How?"

"By dying the way I think he died."

"And what way is that?"

"Murder," Schmitty said.

15.

There were cops all over the place and Schmitty got busy with them. They showed us the way inside and we had a look at Halfhand's body. The inspector had a talk with the doctor. He was riding his murder angle hard. Needle punctures in the arms were easy. Nobody had to look for them. They were too obvious, but the inspector was dead set on finding punctures that would have been made at an impossibly awkward angle, ones that a man could never have made for himself.

The neighborhood doctor couldn't help him with those and when the ME's man turned up he wasn't going out on a limb with any immediate opinion. He was ready to go along with the inspector's request for immediate autopsy and he promised that in post mortem examination they would be keeping a special eye out for anything peculiar they might turn up in direction or character of needle punctures.

It was only after he had finished with that detail, that Schmitty was ready to go look at the room where Halfhand had died. There were frilly curtains, a frilly cover on the studio couch and a moderately frilly lamp. Otherwise the room was on the monastic side. It was gray and black and severe.

The young man to whom this room belonged was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of corduroys, which I suppose are standard costume for a lad in a room in a students' dormitory. The look of the lad, however, was the poorest sort of match to the rather athletic character of his clothes. He looked a very young seminarian and a very solemn one. One of these kids who is all Adam's apple and horn-rimmed eyeglasses, all wrists and elbows.

He looked terrible. He told us that his name was Leroy Merriman

and that Halfhand had been his friend.

"Not the kind of friend you should have been having, boy," Schmitty said.

"He was one of the creatures of My Lord," the boy said with quiet dignity. "They are all my friends."

It could have been a rebuke but he didn't say it that way. He said it flatly, a simple statement. Schmitty looked as though he would have liked to believe it.

"Yes, but he was particularly your friend. How did that happen?"

"He needed help. I tried to help him."

"He came to you?"

"No. I came to him. It was outside the jam lady's shop."

16.

As Schmitty went along with him, it became quite evident that Leroy Merriman knew the score. It became equally evident that knowing the score was by no means the same thing as accepting it. He would never accept it. Leroy Merriman was in the service of an omnipotent Lord, and Leroy Merriman had no reservations on that point. Since it was in the power of his Lord to accomplish anything, there was nothing one could possibly find faulty in the boy's belief that even such a feat as the regeneration of a Halfhand Ackerman was possible.

He had known that Halfhand was a sinner. Inspector Schmidt made him slow down and specify the sin. He specified narcotics addiction. He mentioned burglary and robbery as crimes Ackerman might have committed.

"Whether it was any of these crimes or other crimes or all of them, Inspector," the boy said, "I never knew. He never told me, but he didn't have to tell me. I knew it was a sinful life."

He had known Halfhand for a matter of weeks. He had seen the man first outside Comfort Prince's little shop. After a while he had spoken to Halfhand. He had asked him to come to his room where he could warm himself. He had offered him coffee. He had offered to pray with him and for him. Halfhand had wanted none of it. Halfhand had been impatient and surly. Halfhand had wanted the boy to go away and leave him alone.

Some days later he had again seen Ackerman outside the little shop. Merriman had again tried and it had been the same as the first time, the same proffering of good offices, the same angry rebuff. Merriman, however, had prayed for the man and had prayed for the strength to help him.

"My prayers were answered," he said. "His heart was softened."

He made the statement with complete simplicity. There was nothing of vainglory in it. He was parading neither his virtue nor his power. If he had succeeded, he had known the source of his success.

Schmitty led him through a detailed description of that success, and Merriman was happy to tell it. It had been one afternoon about a fortnight back. Merriman had again seen Halfhand outside the shop and had again accosted him.

"It was miraculous, Inspector," the boy said. "I told him to come with me, that I would pray for him, and it was that day he said yes. He came here with me and we prayed together."

"And that's all?"

"Until today. I didn't see him again until today."

"Where did you find him today?"

"Today I didn't have to seek him out. Today he came of his own accord. He came here."

"Do you remember what time it was?"

"It was just after noon. I had come in from lunch only a moment or two before."

"What did he say?"

"He said he wanted me to pray with him."

"Only that? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else. We prayed together until I had to get ready to leave for a class."

"When was that?"

"A little after one. He was very dirty, more than usually so; and his clothes were torn. He looked very tired. I gave him a shirt and some pants he could put on and I showed him where he could go for a shower. It's just down the hall here."

Sadly he described to us how Halfhand Ackerman had shown some resistance to the idea of washing. He had been docile enough when Merriman had suggested it. He had taken the soap and the towel Merriman had given him and had trotted off ostensibly for the shower room. Merriman, however, happened to be out in the hall a moment later, and Ackerman had been out there at the pay telephone.

"When he saw me he was like a kid who has been sent off to wash his ears and who is trying to get out of it. He looked guilty and he put up the phone. He had only started phoning. His dime was returned when he hung up. He took it and went off to the shower room. I looked out again after a moment or two and he was at the phone again. He did that five times until I finally took him by the arm and took him to the showers and waited while he undressed and soaped up. Then I had to run for my class."

"And he didn't say what he wanted at the telephone?"

"I didn't ask him. I wanted him to wash and I did have to get to my class."

It had been a little more than an hour before Merriman had returned. He had found Halfhand in his room, washed and changed.

"We prayed again, but then it was a losing battle, Inspector. He was sitting at the window when I came back. I got him to come away from there and kneel with me and I prayed, but after only a few mo-

ments he got up and went back to the window. I asked him to kneel with me again and he did. He kneeled by the window and I prayed."

As Merriman told it to us, he had prayed unremittingly. He had known it when Halfhand had risen from his knees and had gone out of the room and when Halfhand was gone he prayed for him. He had also prayed for himself. He had known he was failing and he had prayed for a return of the strength that had brought Halfhand to him.

"He was gone only a few minutes and then he came back," he said. "I was glad. I didn't say anything to him. I didn't even look at him. I just went on praying. I thought it would be better that way. You see, I had to get it over to him that I wasn't watching him. He had to know that it was our Lord who was watching him, and he did know. With neither of us saying a word, he came and kneeled beside me again and we prayed together. We were there for quite a while and then he keeled over."

"Did you know what it was?"

"When I picked him up to lay him on the bed, I knew," the boy said sadly. "He'd had a shot when he had gone out, but he had come back to pray, and that was something."

Merriman explained it to the inspector. That was the one bright spot in the whole grim business. Halfhand had been praying right through his last conscious moment. There had been that at least, repentance. Merriman had darkened the room for him and had tiptoed away. He had gone to the library to do his studying and when the library had closed, he had gone to the chapel to pray again.

"The sin of pride," he said sadly. "I was vaunting myself because I had shown him how to pray. If I had come back here instead, I would have found him while he was still alive. I would have seen that he wasn't just asleep, not even in a drugged sleep. I could have had a doctor for him. He might have lived to conquer the habit."

I didn't have to look at the inspector's face to know he doubted that, but neither he nor I said a word. Leaving regeneration out of it, I doubted that there had been any time when a doctor could have done anything for Halfhand. Those massive overdoses taken directly in the vein put a man very quickly beyond any medical help. The inspector led the young seminarian back to less exalted ground. He wanted to know how Halfhand had come by that last shot. Nothing had been found on him, no needle, none of the necessary paraphernalia.

"He gave it to himself when he went out," Merriman said. "He meant it to be his last shot. That must have been it or he wouldn't have thrown his stuff away."

"You know that he threw the needle away?"

"He must have thrown it away. It hasn't been found on him. He had come to his decision. It would be his last shot."

"Suicide?"

"I wouldn't want to think that, Inspector."

"I wouldn't want to either," said Schmitty.

"I blame myself, Inspector."

"Don't," Schmitty said. "Don't blame yourself. You did the best you could. I don't think anyone could have done better."

He wasn't just saying it. He meant it.

We left the seminary and went back to Homicide West. The boys who had done the job on Andrew Simms's place were coming in. They gave us what they had and they appeared to have just about everything the inspector wanted. They had about half an ounce of uncut heroin. They had found it in the late Andy's refrigerator. One of the boys had wondered why Andy froze his ice trays solid and didn't use the metal partitions that divide the ice into cubes. He had thawed one of the trays and had found that it was ice only half way down. Under the ice was a false aluminum bottom and under that the heroin in waterproof packets.

Schmitty commended the detective who had turned that up but he spent more time over a find that had taken far less persistence and ingenuity. He had asked for keys and the boys had keys for him. They had a key ring they had turned up in a dresser.

Schmitty compared it with the key ring that had been taken from the ignition switch of the wrecked Cadillac. They matched exactly in every respect. Both were gold. From both hung the identical set of keys. On the body had been found just two keys and we had known all along what those were. They were the new keys, the keys to the changed locks. Kathy had given them to Andy when he had come to the house door.

"He did have two sets," I said, "and he hadn't lost them at all. He just mislaid them and later found them again."

The young detective who had figured out the ice trays shook his head. He had a better theory. He expounded it. It was terrific.

It wasn't the simplest story, but it did make sense. Any way you looked at the late Andy Simms, Andy Simms had been no good. He had been up to his ears in the narcotics traffic and he had also been milking Beryl Tucker for every last thing he could get out of her. That Beryl had been madly in love with the jerk was all too obvious. Even I didn't have to be told that.

"Somehow," the young detective said, "we've got to get a look at this Tucker dame's will. I'm betting Andy was in there to inherit and Andy knew it."

Schmitty nodded. "I'm expecting her to tell us that," he said. "She's

made no secret of the way she went for him."

The young detective had it that Andy had run into some trouble in his narcotics business. He, or Halfhand working for him, had done a bad job of cutting on a batch of heroin. A couple of their customers had developed tetanus, and Andy had made desperate efforts to cure them. He hadn't dared let a doctor get at them and without a doctor he hadn't done at all well. He had set Halfhand to nursing the men, and Halfhand, impatient of the job, had disposed of one of the sick men, making him look like a mugging victim. Andy hadn't gone for that. It was far too dangerous. He had thrown Halfhand out.

But Halfhand could get picked up and he could talk. Andy kept an eye on him. Then came last night and Halfhand went on the prowl.

"That's not all right," the young cop said. "Andy follows him. Andy sees him mug you, Inspector. Andy gets him into the car and gets him away from there quick. They go back to where they've been keeping the tetanus cases and the other one has died. Meanwhile Andy has had a look at your billfold, Inspector. From your papers he knows that it's even worse than he thought. That's where he gets real smart."

He went into detail on just how smart Simms had gotten. Simms had planted the billfold on the body of the second tetanus victim and had dumped the body out into the gutter for the police to find it. He had told Halfhand to lie low and he would bring him a shot. He had let Halfhand keep Schmitty's watch because it was necessary that the watch be found on Halfhand's body and Andy had known that Halfhand was going to be a body before the day was out.

Andy then gave Halfhand an extra-large dose of heroin, and this killed him according to plan. Andy was in the clear.

At that point I was bubbling over with questions. What about the bomb? Who killed Andy? I didn't get to ask them because I couldn't get a word in edgewise. The way it pieced together was that Andy had been doing beautifully except that he ran into a piece of especially bad luck. I had spotted the license number and I had remembered it. We had gone to see Beryl Tucker.

"Beryl's beginning to ask questions," he said. "He's in a bad spot. It looks like he's going to have to get out of his junk line and he's not too sure he can answer all of Beryl's questions."

So he'd built a bomb. That the bomb could have been an amateur job we were all willing to agree. He had fixed the Cadillac and then he had gone away and phoned Beryl that cock and bull story about losing his keys. Andy Simms had wanted it fixed so that he would have a witness to the fact that he came up and he couldn't get in. Kathy let him in and he took right off.

The rigged car had been meant for Beryl. Andy had rigged it for her. I couldn't see how he had made the mistake of using it himself. I asked.

"That's where it went wrong on him," the kid said. "He fixed the car she usually used, not the one she let him have the use of. He comes into the garage and he sees only the one car. It never enters his head to even look and see if maybe it was the other one she took. He thinks right away the bomb hadn't worked. She's driving around with all that dynamite under her. What if she goes into a garage to have the car serviced and a mechanic lifts the hood and finds it? Andy's got to move and fast. He's got to take off after her and catch up with her before she finds out what he fixed up for her. He steps on the starter and blooie. No more Andy."

That was the story. I looked to Schmitty. He asked me if I wanted to call it a night.

I looked at my watch. It was after two, and that did look like a night to me.

"You're calling it a night, aren't you?" I said.

"Only a few details left," he said.

"And they wait till morning. You'll hear from the ME then and you certainly can't talk to Beryl before then."

"That's right," he said, as he picked up the phone and dialled a number.

I thought he would be calling the ME's office just on the chance that there would be someone there and they might have a little something for him. I was only half listening when he got his number and started talking. Then I heard him say, "Mr. Williams?" and I started listening in earnest.

He hated disturbing Mr. Williams at such an hour. He would never have thought of calling Mr. Williams if he hadn't known that Mr. Williams would be deeply concerned about Beryl Tucker and would be eager to help all he could.

Schmitty asked if he could come right up and see Mr. Williams. I gathered that he could. They were making a date for just as quickly as he could get up there.

"What's that for?" I asked, when the inspector had hung up.

He said I didn't have to come since there were only the loose ends he was tying in, but I didn't have the bandaged head. I felt that if he could take it, I could. I went along.

17.

Seeing that youngster put together the threads of the case had been a terrible blow to my own self-respect, but when we were talking to Brian Williams I began to put a higher estimate on myself. I had a feeling that I did have enough knack, in any case, to recognize it right off as soon as the questions Schmitty was asking Williams had begun to bite. That Williams was smooth, as smooth as they come; but

even the smooth ones sweat and I had enough knack to see it when Schmitty had him sweating.

He was in pyjamas when he opened the door to us and he had a drink in his hand. When the inspector apologized for having awakened him, he explained that he hadn't been to sleep at all. He had heard a radio news report that said explosion in Miss Beryl Tucker's garage. Schmitty had put a lid on the story for a while, but it had broken during the evening.

Schmitty told Williams a little about the explosion. I filled in the time by looking over Brian Williams' apartment.

It was bare. It was Spartan. It was shabby. His pyjamas were the cheap kind you see on bargain tables. They had been to the laundry and they had shrunk the way those cheap pyjamas will. The bottoms hit him about halfway up the shin.

I'd heard of women who took guys for everything they had, but I had never seen a case that had the look of this one. Here there was every sign to say that *everything* wasn't just a figure of speech. This guy looked as though he'd been doing a wonderful job of keeping up a front but as though behind that facade he was scraping bottom.

Schmitty started with the questions and for a while the answers came along easily. Williams knew that Andrew Simms had been a friend of Beryl Tucker's. He had never even seen him.

"Weren't you curious about him?"

"No. What right would I have to be curious?"

"At breakfast this morning — I guess I should be calling it yesterday morning by now — you were noticeably startled when Miss Tucker said she had two Cadillacs. Hadn't you known that?"

"No. I hadn't. I thought the other car in the garage belonged to one of the tenants she has in the garage building. I never thought to ask her."

"And you would never have bought her the second Cadillac if you'd known she already had one and that she needed an extra one only so she could give another man the use of it?"

Williams gulped. He choked on his drink. He got red in the face. He demanded that Schmitty explain.

The inspector didn't turn a hair. He explained. As he did so, the flush faded from the man's face. He went ashen and he sweated. At the first opportunity he broke in on the inspector.

"I want to go back to your question," he spluttered. "Who said I gave Beryl a Cadillac?"

"Didn't you?"

"Don't make me laugh. I work for a living. Where would I get the kind of money she uses? I buy theater tickets. I take her dancing. Just that keeps me broke."

The inspector quoted the beat

cop at him, the wads of money, the important jewelry.

"The man's a liar," Williams shouted.

He was all over the inspector. He was babbling at him. He wanted to show his income tax reports.

The inspector smoothed him down. "All right," he said. "She's a rich woman and Simms had his hooks into her. We're figuring he stood to benefit from her will. All I'm trying to find out is how rich. I've been asking you because, having been told that you were the one who was doing her so well, I thought you could tell me just how well. So it was a bum steer. Where she gets her money isn't important. She had it and Simms was greedy for it. I'll see her in the morning."

He thanked Williams and we got out of there. All the way out to the door, Williams trailed after us. He was babbling steadily. He kept working at it. He was a poor man. He was sweating.

Back on the street, I asked Schmitty, "What is it? Income tax evasion? Or is he scared of the way he shows up in the triangle? Williams pays. Andy gets. Williams finds out. Williams goes berserk."

"We'll see what we can learn from Beryl in the morning," Schmitty said.

18.

I was asleep the minute I hit the pillow and it didn't seem more than another minute later that the inspector was waking me again. Actually it had been hours. I looked at my watch and it was going on ten. Schmitty had been up since nine.

"I just had Beryl on the phone," he said. "We have an appointment with her this afternoon."

Schmitty had also been talking to the Medical Examiner and he was delighted with that. They had found the needle puncture Schmitty had been wanting. It was a fresh one. It was into the vein and it was at an angle that Halfhand could never have managed on himself. He hadn't taken that massive dose of heroin. It had been rammed into him by someone else.

I dressed and we started downtown. We were bowling down the west side. "Homicide West?" I asked.

"No," Schmitty said. "Now that we have the ME's report, it's back to the seminary."

I almost asked him to let me out. I didn't think I wanted to be there when he would work out on Leroy Merriman, but then I thought about it some more and I did want to be there. I was angry with the inspector. I had complete faith in the Merriman boy and I knew I had to be there. I had to see Schmitty get his comeuppance.

When we got there Leroy wasn't in his room and Schmitty said we'd wait. While we waited he started going through Merriman's story. He actually went through the paces

of it. Out of the boy's room, down the hall to the shower room, into the shower room and out again. Then he went to the pay telephone, dropped a dime, and dialled a number. He let it ring a bit and then hung up and took his dime back. Then again back to the shower room and back to the phone for a repeat performance.

Up to five times I could follow on it or I thought I could. He was reenacting what Leroy Merriman had told us Halfhand had done. Then the inspector was doing it the sixth time and I kept count. He had done it fifteen times in all before he quit and by then I was looking at the gauze patch on his head and wondering if the doctors couldn't have been mistaken.

And after that he picked up the phone again and this time he did put his call through. He got on to Homicide West and he gave instructions for having the whole avenue out by the seminary's dormitory wing covered by plainclothesmen.

"They'll love you," I said. "Ringing them fifteen times before you get through."

"I wasn't ringing them."

"Numbers at random?"

"Five at Williams' apartment, five at Beryl Tucker's place, five at Haycox's drug store. If somebody thinks Halfhand somehow survived yesterday's shot and now he can't get the phone alone long enough to talk, somebody will be down here to give him an even bigger one."

"Then you don't think it was Andy gave it to him?"

"It wasn't Andy. There's big money in narcotics. Who was behind Andy?"

"Williams. It scared the daylights out of him having you suspect he wasn't a poor man."

Merriman came back to his room. He was surprised to see us but he wasn't troubled. I was glad of that. Schmitty asked if he minded our using his room. He said he didn't mind but he did ask what for. Schmitty told him we'd laid a trap for Halfhand's killer.

Merriman asked no more questions. He went over to the sofa bed and kneeled down beside it. He prayed. He did it silently. I was watching Schmitty. Schmitty was at the window looking out but he was staying behind the curtains.

Then Schmitty dropped back and headed across the room. I went with him. Merriman didn't move. He didn't even raise his head. We ran out into the street and, when we turned the corner to the avenue, we saw it. The big, custom-built car was parked at the curb. Schmitty ran for it.

It was Beryl Tucker behind the wheel. She was dressed completely in black. She saw us and she waved.

"Inspector," she said. "I'm looking for a church. I do feel Andy's funeral should be down here among the people who knew him best. What's in there?"

"Theological seminary," Schmitty

said. "It's rather like a church just now. There is a fellow in there. He's praying for you. He doesn't know you, Miss Tucker, but he prays for all sinners. He's good. He's really good."

"Really, Inspector. I loved Andy. You'll never understand how I loved him."

"You're right there. That I'll never understand. I'll take that needle you have ready."

"Needle? What are you talking about?"

"The needle with which you were going to have another try at killing Halfhand Ackerman. You won't need it. He died last night. I was the one on the telephone this morning."

19.

For a moment she looked as though she were going to step on the starter and try to make a break for it, but she didn't. "I suppose you can explain this nonsense you're talking," she said.

"I can. All of it, except that it isn't nonsense."

Schmitty talked. It was extraordinary how right that young detective had been the night before and how wrong.

Andy had been smart and Andy had been careful. He had known that he had to stay in the neighborhood if he was going to run his drug traffic successfully and that the one thing that would eventually call attention to him in the neighborhood would be unexplainable evidences of wealth. But Andy had wanted to enjoy the money and to make it, too, and the answer to that problem had been Beryl. Andy set Beryl up in her elegant house. The money poured in, and Andy passed it on to Beryl. What he wanted to spend he ostentatiously took back from Beryl. He had his good times. He had his fancy car and he had a cover for all his displays of wealth. It was an unsavory sort of cover, but he was safe and he had fun and the smell of it didn't bother Andy.

Even Brian Williams hadn't bothered Andy because Brian Williams was part of the picture as Andy wanted it. It had been easy to make it seem that it was Brian Williams who was the rich boy friend and Andy the kept man. It had been easy to make it seem as though the roles were the exact opposite of what they had in fact been.

"There was only one weak point in the whole structure," Schmitty said. "Andy had to trust you. He watched you as closely as he could, but he couldn't watch you all the time and you stepped out of line. You got greedy. You got hold of Halfhand Ackerman and you tried to squeeze Andy out. That was a mistake. You didn't know the business well enough, and Halfhand was unreliable. He didn't cut the stuff right and the customers got lockjaw. You were in a spot and you had to turn to Andy to get you out

of it. He didn't like it, but he had to rally around to save his own neck."

Schmitty described how Andy had rallied around. Andy had tried to bring Halfhand back into line but before he had him well in hand, Ackerman had mugged Schmitty and Andy had been smart enough to know when the fat was in the fire. When Schmitty had gone to Beryl, Andy had known his time was short.

But Andy again had reckoned without Beryl's greed. He had thought Beryl would have been cured of trying to go it alone. She had seen the tangled web she had woven when she had taken some of the threads into her own hands. But Beryl hadn't been through.

Her deal with Halfhand had failed. Between them they had messed it up; and because they had messed it up, it had become necessary to eliminate Andy. The need was the same. It was only the cause that was different.

Beryl invented the story of Andy's lost keys and called the locksmith in to change the locks. She went to the garage to take her car out and while she was there she rigged Andy's car. She was moving fast now. Halfhand had called her for help. He was hiding at the seminary and he was desperate for his shot. The car would take care of Andy. She had to take care of Halfhand. She had prepared a shot for him and had driven down to the seminary. Halfhand had come out and she had given him the shot, a shot that should have killed him.

"It was going to be all Halfhand's doing," Schmitty told her. "You would be horrified when you learned about Andy. You would be grieved. It would be that Halfhand killed Andy and then killed himself. You would be in the clear. Out of danger, out of having to give Andy his money back or even of sharing it with him."

She had intended to be prostrated with shock and grief until the case would solve itself as she had planned it, but then in the morning her phone had started ringing. It had rung just as it did when Halfhand was trying to reach her and couldn't get the phone alone long enough to get through to her. She had fallen into the trap. She had prepared her needle and she had come.

"I have no needle," she said. "I have no idea of what you're talking about. I don't believe Andy had a thing to do with any of these horrible people or any of these horrible things."

Schmitty reached in to open the glove compartment. She jumped at him and raked the back of his hand with her fingernails. The boys were on her and they pulled her away. Schmitty got the glove compartment open. He brought out the large syringe, the long needle. The heroin was already in the syringe. It was a gigantic dose.

She was still fighting when they took her away and she never stopped fighting right up through the courts, but it wasn't any good. She had made too many mistakes.

20.

I asked the inspector when he had first begun to suspect Beryl Tucker.

"From the first," he said. "At breakfast she was too eager to be angry. She was concentrating on that and she lost her head over the strawberry jam."

I had completely forgotten the jam, the little pot she wouldn't have on her breakfast table. I had admired the pretty strawberry painted on the enameled top, but I had forgotten it. It was such a small thing to remember among all those dead men.

"That was how she'd had her contacts set up with Halfhand," Schmitty told me. "He would hang around the jam shop and she would come to buy jam. He would open the door for her. She would slip him a tip, except that it wasn't a tip. When Merriman tried to get him in the first few times, Halfhand wanted none of it. He was still waiting for her those days. On the sunny day, Merrimen happened to hit him right after he'd made his contact and Halfhand wanted to get off the street. He went with Merriman. The routine would be that after one of these contacts with Beryl, he wouldn't take right off. He'd hang around long enough afterward to make it look good and that would be nervous hanging around. That one day Merriman came along at just the right time for Halfhand. He gave Halfhand a good excuse for cutting short that final hanging around. That time he jumped at Merriman's offer. Yesterday when he was running from us, he remembered Merriman's room as a good place to go."

"Then last night, when we had it all figured that Andy had tried to kill her, you knew better?"

"I knew better," Schmitty said, "because I knew that she had Comfort Prince's jam and that it made her awfully mad to have it come to the table in the jar Comfort put it in. That was the clue to the whole thing. It got all the kinks out of the story. Andy rigging the car and then being so blind that he used it himself. That was a big kink. There was a bigger one. So very much money, it couldn't have been made in a day. It had to have come from a long-time successful operation that had been well run. Why should it go sour suddenly and so stupidly sour that it gave a couple of customers lockjaw? I could see only one answer to that, a change in management."

"Beryl's tangled web?"

Schmitty nodded. "And don't say she wasn't first practicing to deceive," he said. "I know she was an old hand at it, but hers was another

kind of deception, the bedroom kind. Pushing heroin, that was different. She was going out of her league."

I was still a little confused, but the inspector took care of that. He told me just how it had gone. There had been big money, but it had been Andy's. Andy had only made it seem that it was Beryl's but it had really been his. Beryl was the one who'd had merely the use of it and she had wanted more than that.

She made a try at the narcotics traffic on her own. She got Andy's man Halfhand to work for her and their badly cut heroin had given the customers lockjaw.

Andy had tried to take hold. The trouble Mrs. Robinson heard was Andy taking hold. There had been no more meetings outside the jam shop after that. Beryl's brief try at the narcotics game had ended and Halfhand had been put on the job of nursing the tetanus victims. He had tired of it and had crudely murdered one of them, Then he had gone on the prowl with Andy after him to bring him back to the reservation.

Andy had picked Halfhand up immediately after Halfhand had mugged the inspector. He had driven Halfhand away and it had been during that ride that Halfhand had had done the frantic clutching at the car door. Then in the morning Andy learned that I had seen the license number and then he had known that he was coming to the end of his trail. He had told Beryl as much. He was quitting and they were going away together.

At that point Beryl had put the second half of her plan into operation. She had rigged the car. Halfhand remained as her only loose end and Halfhand, hiding in the seminary and desperate for his dope, had called on her. That had been her chance. She had killed him.

All my questions were answered.

"That young detective over at Homicide West," I said, "If he had only known about Beryl's strawberry jam, he would have had it the right way around."

The inspector shook his head. "If that had been the whole of it," he said, "I'd be grooming that kid for my job. It was the way he missed out on the significance of Andy's having two key rings after Beryl had said she didn't know whether he had a duplicate set of keys or not. She slipped up there and the boy missed it, but that was the least of it. His worst place was the way he explained Andy's using the car if it had been Andy who rigged it."

"No," I said. "He had that figured completely reasonably."

"Only as far as he went," Schmitty said. It could have been just the way the kid figured it but only up to the point where Andy put his car key into the ignition. He would have been using the key to the wrong car. The ignition wouldn't have been on. No ignition, no spark. No spark, no explosion."

CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Knot Quite True

In London, England, a judge granted a restraint order to William J. Bennett, who is suing his wife for divorce, to prevent her from attacking him again when he visits his pub — the True Lover's Knot.

Fish Story

Robert Boulestin of Le Havre, France, found his stolen loot posed a serious problem recently when he took 384 boxes of lobster and 195 of salmon. When police caught up with him he was eating his way through the remaining 137 boxes of lobster and 17 of salmon. They speedily removed him to a hospital.

Mad Musician

When Walter Emerson's music shop in Santa Monica, Calif., was entered recently, he reported to police that the burglar was a bit confused. Two items were missing, a ukelele and a book on how to play the harmonica.

Insomniac

Raymond Scully, 27, of Grayling, Mich., pleaded guilty of disorderly conduct and engaging in a dangerous sport, in the Grand Rapids police court lately. Suffering from sleeplessness, he'd been putting in time on archery practise, shooting arrows into the windows of Calvin College buildings. Fine $25 and costs.

Quick with the Quip

Manhattan Beach, Calif., police arrested a glib-tongued fellow in the wee small hours recently, after pinning him in a flashlight beam up on a drugstore roof. "Take that light off me, man! It's a blackout," he shouted, "and I'm an air raid warden!"

Children's Department

A Logansport, Ind., miss, Louise Gilman, 10, was operating a miniature golf course for her parents when a boy with an air rifle held her up and took 25¢.

In Toronto, Canada, Peter Kocasis, water boy for a soccer team, was fined $10 for assault. He poured water over the referee's head.

Turnabout

Patrick Hastings, 29, of New York City, had a practical joke backfire lately when he decided to handcuff his pal, Private James Speer, and brand new bride, and then mail the keys to Alaska. But he arrived just too late at the wedding reception in a Brooklyn hotel with his $15 heavy

duty handcuffs. With the bride and groom gone, another guest got a bright idea. And at 4 A.M. Hastings and his own wife were still wearily manacled together, after a pair of emergency squad cops had worked an hour and a half to cut them apart.

Diagnosis: Conscience

On her clothesline in Santa Monica, Calif., Mrs. Delores D. Stack found a dollar bill clipped with a clothespin where three missing pairs of silk panties had been hung that morning.

In Richmond, Calif., drug store clerk Ed Millwood received a telephone call from an unknown character who said, "I needed some cash so I robbed your safe. Your money is under a car parked behind the store. I'll pay the rest back." Finding the safe empty, Millwood rushed to the parking lot and discovered $750 in a paper bag. Only $61 was gone.

In Jacksonville, Fla., another unknown with a tender conscience broke into Mrs. Janice Grof's home and took a $20 bill from an envelope in a dresser drawer. The next day, reports Detective Sergeant J. W. Wingate, the house was entered again, and a bill of the same denomination replaced in the drawer.

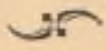
While in Detroit, Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Malloy of Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich., told police that when they were gone over the weekend, 150 pennies and a .32 caliber pistol disappeared from a bureau drawer. But the following Sunday night, while they were home, all the pennies and the gun were put inside a screen door. With them was a note: "I tried to take these things but my conscience objected. P. S. I oiled your gun."

Memory Master

Indianapolis police are baffled by a genius named Melvin Otto Atkins, 29, who steals cars by duplicating the keys from memory. He follows up ads of car owners eager to sell, then on a demonstration ride, memorizes the notching on the keys, goes home and cuts them accurately. He was arrested while rebuilding a car stolen from a Knightstown auto agency salesman onto the wreck of a similar car.

Casket Comedy

Robert Graham, 46, Chicago night watchman, heard stealthy footsteps in his employer's basement one dark night. Quietly flicking on the light, he surprised a prowler, who let out a terrified howl and fled down the aisles. He had broken into the Illinois Casket Co.'s main storage room for coffins.



The General Slept Here

A Neal Cotten Novelette

BY SAM S. TAYLOR

I SAT there at the counter, fingers caressing the glass sugar dispenser. I had that dull after-lunch feeling, and my brain was having trouble bringing into focus again the details of the insurance job that had brought me up to Hollywood this morning. If it had only been the catsup, or the mustard, or the tired menu that had lured my migrant fingers, everything could have been nice and relaxing. But it had to be the sugar dispenser.

"*Mind* letting me share that sugar now?" The intonation wasn't quite as subtle as the perfume. Both drifted over from my left, snapping me out of my abstraction.

"Why — no. Not at all." I made a hasty effort at compliance. It was an effort with inadequate observation. My elbow pushed her pitcher of coffee cream from the counter. There was a modest crash on the floor. There was a more pronounced intake of furious breath.

"God! How clumsy can you be?"

I looked at her for the first time, the tour of inspection starting at her suntanned leg which she was dabbing with a napkin. There was more spilled cream on the tweedy sports skirt. My glance continued up, past the stimulating detour in the snug turtleneck wool sweater, to the equally snug haircut. She was a redhead, and the pigmentation had an authentic look. I couldn't tell much about the eyes. She was wearing dark glasses. The slanty kind. I got the impression of a girl above average in height. She rated above average on numerous other points. She was about twenty-five.

I said, "Terribly sorry."

Scorn tilted a corner of the small

Neal Cotten was ducking the police and the underworld, both at the same time — all because of the girl with the tiny scar on her face.

Illustration by Tom O'Sullivan

but vivid mouth. "You *would* have to pick my brand new skirt."

"If you'll send it to the cleaners I'll be glad to pay the bill." I had my business card out now, placing it against her cup.

"Oh, forget it." She started to flip the card aside when something about it impaled her attention. She read: "*Neal Cotten. Private Investigations.* Well, that's a funny one." The exasperation did a quick fade.

"If you mean my being in the business, I'm inclined to agree."

This time I got a smile. "Reason I say it's funny — I had in mind looking up a private detective later this afternoon."

"Any one in particular?"

"No. Matter of fact, I was going to hunt through the classified section."

I reached for her check. "Possibly I could prevail upon you to call off the hunt."

Her eyes frisked me momentarily, then she said softly, "You have."

Ten minutes later we had shifted to a quiet booth in the adjoining bar. When the level of her Benedictine had dropped to the halfway mark, she said, "Perhaps I better get around to explaining why I thought of employing a private detective."

An amber glow from the little wall lamp slid down the contour of her black pullover. "There's really no rush. But if it will ease your mind, just start in."

"It's nothing serious. Just an aunt of mine. I'm trying to locate her."

Sounded like nice easy work. I waited.

"I'd take care of it myself if I were staying here longer. But I have to fly back to New York next week to start rehearsal for a new play, and I'd just love to see Aunt Eunice before I shove off."

A well-pitched voice, oozing culture. At least a year of it. I nodded, "I think we can handle your problem."

"Good. I'd just *hate* to look up another private detective." The smile stuck there like a luggage label. "You have such an efficient look."

"Thanks." I showed commendable modesty. I also brought out my notebook and started writing. "Client: Vivian Lindsay. Subject: Missing aunt." I looked up. "Her full name?"

"Eunice Emmet Sigsbee."

I wrote it down. "Age?"

"Eighty, if she's a year. And I'm sure she's still unmarried."

"Can't blame a girl for being careful these days. And where was she living the last time you heard from her?"

"Well, actually it's been years since I heard. Not since I was a little girl. But a friend of mine was out here in Los Angeles a few months ago and said she ran into my aunt." She dug into her bag and came up with a slip of paper. "Here's the address she gave me."

I read: "Fifty-seven Granby Street, Bay Shore. Out near the ocean. Did you check there?"

She recrossed her legs, the tip of her sandal resting ever so lightly against my own leg. "I phoned. Turned out to be an apartment house. No one there by that name. The landlady took over the place a few months ago. Said if my aunt had lived there at all, it must have been during the previous ownership."

"How about the forwarding address?"

"That's the confusing thing. She didn't leave any."

"Hmmm. Well, at least we have a starting point. I may drop out there later today. Where do I contact you if anything turns up?"

"Oh, that." She brushed fingertips along the side of her redwood bob. The effect was supposed to be very casual. "I've got your card. You'd better let me get in touch with you. I'm stopping with stuffy old friends. You know how it is."

I had a pretty fair idea, and it didn't square with her explanation. Miss Lindsay wasn't the kind to bunk up in Hollywood with stuffy old companions. I merely nodded, "Sure. You can usually catch me at the office in the mornings. Now just one more little item. In view of the damage already inflicted on your wardrobe, we'll make the fee a flat one. Say, fifty bucks —"

"I'll buy that." She clicked open the handbag again. This time she came up with a cluster of money, peeling off five new tens. "And if there are any additional expenses, just go ahead."

She finished off her Benedictine while I wrote out a receipt. I indicated the empty glass. "All new clients are entitled to one refill."

"Another time. I really must get going now. Meeting my agent over at the Roosevelt."

Outside I asked, "Can I drive you over?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll walk. I can use the exercise."

She gave me her hand. It lingered in mine until we reached the curb. Then it eased out like a ship going down the ways. I watched her cross the street. She had an interesting walk. She was an interesting girl.

Extremely.

2.

Granby was like most of the other Bay Shore streets that sloped down to the waterfront. A solid block of worn-out cottages and shabby buildings that leaned against each other like tired homegoers on a crowded bus. The tallest was a four-story affair that hadn't sported a paint job since the Hoover administration. A sign over the entrance door read, *Granby Apartments*.

I stepped inside to the small lobby. In the hall beyond, a Filipino was vacuuming what remained of the carpeting. To my left was a door with a metal plate, proclaiming, *Manager*. I rang the bell.

When the door finally opened, a lined cheerless landlady's face showed around the edge. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for Miss Eunice Sigsbee. I don't seem to see her name on your —"

"She ain't stopping here."

"Oh? Then she's moved, perhaps?"

"P'raps."

"Well, I wonder if you could give me her forwarding address?" The whine of the vacuum had edged closer.

"Look, mister. You're the second one who's pestered me about her since yesterday. This ain't no post office. She didn't leave no forwarding address." The door slammed shut.

That's what I like about Southern California. You run into so many friendly types. As I turned from her door there was a low sibilant sound.

I looked over my shoulder. The vacuum was switched off now. The little Filipino beckoned with a movement of his head. I went over to him in the hall.

"You look for Miss Sigsbee?" It sounded promising.

"You've got good ears."

"Got good memory, too." He included a crafty smile.

"Okay. What's the deal?"

"Five dollar."

His eyes didn't shift when I studied them. I came up with a five-spot.

That produced an ivory-filled grin. "Thank you, sir. You go see Mr. Kessler. He tell you where she move."

"Mr. Kessler. Lives here?"

"No, sir. He move, too, when this slob take over." He indicated the landlady's door. "It's the Mariposa Apartments. Lindell Street. That's two block east. Up the hill."

There was a series of imperious knocks that came from the landlady's side of the thin wall. The houseboy made a contemptuous sound, then resumed his vacuuming.

I went out to the street, walked up the hill to Lindell, and found the Mariposa Apartments. It was no improvement over Kessler's previous address.

According to his letter-box he had apartment 206. I went up to the second floor. The radio broadcasting race results seemed to be his. The door didn't open until the second knock. He was a dark-haired slender man with inordinately pale skin, and a long nose that seemed to be perpetually smelling for trouble. He was wearing slacks and a soiled T-shirt. He was in his middle thirties. About my age.

He cased me quickly with impatient eyes. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Kessler?"

"Could be. What's on your mind?"

"I think you might be able to help me."

"This ain't the Palsy Fund."

"Naturally. I —"

He broke me off with a shushing motion. When he caught the results of the last race at an out-of-town track, his mouth knotted bitterly. "Goddam."

I tried a little sympathy. "Pretty hard to beat 'em, huh?"

"Brother, it's impossible. Only it takes some guys a long time to wise up." His sharp eyes drifted to mine. This time they were more tired than hostile. "All right. Let's have the pitch."

"Mind if I come in?"

He shrugged, "Sure, why not. The way the lock works on this damn door, everybody walks in these days."

It was the kind of drab layout that went with the house. He flopped on the couch, pointing to a sagging chair. I pulled out my cigarettes, offering him one. When we both lit up, I said, "I'm trying to locate Miss Eunice Sigsbee. Understand you know the lady."

He puffed noncommitally. "What makes you think that?"

"The houseboy over at the Granby was pretty sure you'd be able to tell me where my Aunt Eunice moved to."

"Your aunt?" He gave me a curious look.

"Yes. I'm anxious to locate her. Been away for some time and didn't know she'd moved. Unfortunately she forgot to leave her forwarding address."

Smoke drifted past the smirking lips. "You're full of apcray, brother. And she's not your aunt. The old babe told me herself all her male relatives kicked off years ago."

A hep boy. He'd really caught me with my technique down. "Sorry, Kessler. Wrong approach. Matter of fact, I never saw the lady. Just trying to locate her for someone else."

One eye narrowed. "Dick, huh?"

"Yeah. Private." I dug out a business card, handing it to him. "My client's an out-of-town niece. Anxious to look up her dear old auntie while she's visiting here. Simple as that."

"Uh-huh." The look was still cagey. "What's her name?"

There didn't seem to be any point in withholding that information. All that was involved was an old woman's address. This guy appeared to have it. I said, "Vivian Lindsay. Actress. She's out of New York."

"Don't exactly ring any bells. What's the babe look like?"

I gave him a brief rundown. I added, "Small crescent scar where her dimple should be."

I thought I spotted a momentary reaction. Then he reached for a tray and ground out his cigarette. "It'll cost you a pair of sawbucks."

I put my wallet to work again. I handed him two of the crisp bills she'd given me this morning.

He slipped them under a table lamp, merely saying, "Drop back tonight around ten. I'll have it for you."

I said tightly, "What are you trying to pull?"

"Keep your shirt on. You'll get the address. Gotta do a little checking, that's all."

I finally nodded, "All right, Kessler." At the door, I looked over my shoulder. "Just one little thing. I don't like to be short-changed."

He did a slow retake on that smirk of his.

3.

I spent the rest of the afternoon down at the beach. Later I had dinner in a boardwalk delicatessen, then used up the next few hours in a nearby movie palace. It wasn't quite ten when I emerged into the balmy night air. I went to my car and drove back up the hill to the Mariposa Apartments.

Light edged the door bottom of 206. There was the muted sound of radio music, but it seemed to come from further down the hall. A pair of knocks got me nothing. I rapped a little more impressively. Same lack of response. Something told me I was getting the runaround. My first impulse was to go downstairs and wait until he showed up. Then I remembered something he'd said about his door. I tried the knob. It offered less resistance than a four-time bride on her current honeymoon. I started to walk in.

Then very suddenly a four-engined bomber crashed on my head, and the floor rushed up to embrace me. I don't know how long I was out there in space, but when I returned there was a taste of blood, and a couple of Saber jets were playing tag under my scalp. I eventually managed to get off the floor. A bottle of whiskey loomed on the coffee table. I began to weave toward it.

Then very acutely I realized Mr. Kessler was at home. He didn't see me. I didn't think he'd ever see me, his bookie, or anyone else again. One side of his face was flat against the worn carpeting. The rest of him was sprawled in the relaxed way of a body whose legs have been kicked from under by sudden homicide.

There was an ice-pick in his back.

I didn't need that drink now. What I needed was plenty of highway between the Mariposa Apartments and me. Considering my public relations with the Bay Shore police, I knew what I might expect from them if they ever tabbed me as Kessler's guest under these circumstances. Recently I had given grand jury testimony against one of their fine upstanding brethren who had shaken down a client of mine.

But as I had reminded him earlier, I don't like to be short-changed. I had an investment in this chiseler. There was just a chance he had the Sigsbee woman's address all along, and was merely playing me for another touch. It was worth a quick look. There was a drop-lid desk against one wall. The lid was down. I went over and using my handkerchief started sifting an assortment of bills, mostly overdue. Then I spotted the little green indexed book. I found her name under the S's. The address was a small community about five miles inland from Bay Shore. I made a quick note in my own book. I felt better now. It was hardly worth that lump in back of my ear, but I do strive to please.

Going toward the door, I noticed a book of paper matches lying just about where my assailant would have stood when he bopped me. I bent over for it. It was one of those oversized flashy kind, and the gilded inscription said, *Club Belmonti.*

I put it in my pocket.

4.

Not a single homicide had been reported in the morning papers. For the average Los Angeles reader that's as disconcerting as a drought in the wheat-belt. This Kessler had impressed me as being strictly small bananas, but he would have rated a few inches of type if the cops out there had been called in.

Of course, the Bay Shore brass could be sitting on the story. That suited me. They could sit on it until their bottoms corroded. He wasn't my baby. Not any part of him.

Glancing idly through my morning mail I had a vague notion the front office door had opened.

"Don't mind if we bust into your board of directors meeting, do you?"

I looked up. There were two of them. The lead-man was big. That also applied to his facial features, excepting the eyes. Cobalt eyes from which every emotion, save an unvarying resentment, had been drained. He was in his forties. The man behind him was younger, slimmer.

I smiled, "Not at all. I'd invite you to come right in, but I see you've already made it."

Nothing changed in the flat fish-eyed expression. His huge paw started for his coat pocket. I knew what he was going to flash. He needed that identification like the Dupont family needs financing.

He cupped the lieutenant's badge in his palm. "Harlow. Bay Shore Police." He made a slight movement to indicate the other man. "Sergeant Fayne."

That seemed to clear the air on one point. They knew about that cadaver in Apartment 206. Somewhat cloudier was the reason behind this hasty appearance of the law. I said, making conversation, "Used to fish out your way. How they running this season?"

He didn't bother to answer that one. He just sat down and took his time undressing a fresh cigar. He flipped the crumpled cellophane across the room. "What do you know about a party named Jake Kessler?"

"Kessler? Seem to have heard the name somewhere."

"Vague-like, huh?" Contempt maneuvered the tight mouth into a faint grin. He dug into a pocket and came up with a small white card. He laid it on my desk. "See if this helps your memory."

It helped. I had a box of them in the top drawer. Same imprint. "I hand out a lot of these, lieutenant. Good for business, you know."

"You generally hand them out down at the morgue?"

"Not generally. Why?"

"That's where we found this one. In Kessler's pocket. He's over at the county coroner's office now, getting himself an autopsy."

"You don't say. Well, if that means he was knocked off, I'm afraid I can't offer you much help."

"You goddam well are going to explain that card!"

The sergeant was leaning against my file-cabinet. He interjected quietly, "The card shows practically no handling, Cotten. That makes it very recent."

He was a rather good looking man. The somber gray eyes had that world-weariness that sets in too early with these fellows, but they didn't reflect malice.

Harlow didn't like it but I addressed my answer to the sergeant. I react to politeness. "All right. I'm trying to locate a relative for a client of mine. I was tipped off Kessler might know where this relative was living. I went out to Bay Shore yesterday afternoon to see him. Just gave him the card by way of introduction."

Harlow said, around his cigar, "Who's your client?"

"Privileged information, lieutenant. You know that."

"Who's this relative you're talking about?"

"Same answer, lieutenant."

"So you're going to pull that line on us."

"Sorry. That's the way it has to be."

Harlow gave the other dick a foxy smile. Then he started at me again. "Where were you last night, wise guy?"

A wire strummed in my stomach. Up to now I thought this was just a routine check on a card found among the effects of a murdered man. From the hollow stare that was fixed on me, it was beginning to look as though they had a stronger line. Maybe a tenant saw me enter or leave that apartment last night on my return visit. In that case, the very minimum they would hit me with would be failure to report a homicide. Normally, that's bad enough. But in view of my standing with the Bay Shore bunch, I knew my troubles would be king-size if they ever placed me in Kessler's apartment last night.

I tried the debonair approach, just to see what they had. "Driving around. Getting some fresh air."

"Salt air, maybe?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Let's quit horsing around, Cotten. What time did you go back to his place?" He said it as though there wasn't the slightest doubt about my having returned.

Either he had it on me, or he was trying to catch me off first with a fast pitch. I took the long chance.

I said, "I didn't."

For a moment he just glared. Then he sucked in air through his nose. "You're lying."

They don't get virulent when they have it on you. They just give the screw another turn, feed you that

dry remote smile. I felt much better without showing it.

My voice was level. "This is my office, Lieutenant. Rent paid up until the first. Any more questions on the agenda, I'll show you the courtesy of listening. I also expect a minimum effort at courtesy on your part. Otherwise we're off the air as of now."

An extra coat of red surged across his face. He was on his feet now, and for an instant I thought that balled fist was going to fly across the desk. Then the malignant eyes shifted to a point on the wall behind me. "Better get yourself a new picture for that frame, wise guy. Something tells me that license of yours is going to be out of circulation very soon."

I didn't answer. Harlow swung around, gave his subordinate a curt "Let's get going" nod, and strode out.

When their heavy tread receded down the hall, I broke out a fresh cigarette, took a deep drag, holding it before exhaling against clenched teeth.

What a guy has to put up with in my business.

5.

After lunch I put in a couple of hours on a minor job, then returned to the office with the afternoon papers.

This time I found the story on page three. No splash, no art, just another low-bracket killing.

FORMER SUSPECT IN KITTRIDGE PAYROLL ROBBERY FOUND SLAIN

The body of Jacob Kessler, 35, was discovered in his small Bay Shore apartment today by police who were summoned by Miss Bertha Darby, manager of the dwelling. He had apparently died last night, the victim of an ice-pick stabbing. Police officials identified the ex-convict as one of the trio apprehended last year for complicity in the huge payroll hold-up of the Kittridge Aviation Company. The haul was in excess of $200,000, very little of which was subsequently recovered.

Due to uncertainty on the part of an eye-witness, Kessler was acquitted, but the other two men, Walter 'Whitey' Bronson and Tony Cusso, were convicted and sent to Folsom for long terms. Cusso died in a prison accident three months ago.

Lieutenant Frank Harlow, of the Bay Shore Police, pointed out that Kessler is known to have been an inveterate gambler, adding that his department is investigating the possibility that Kessler's murder may have resulted from welching on recent losses to local bookies. Among those questioned was Neal Cotten, a Los Angeles private detective. Cotten was not held for the time being.

I loved that closing touch. Harlow was as subtle as a quotation on a lavatory wall. Just enough doubtful connotation to remind me that the axe was dangling over my head.

The story in the other afternoon rag was substantially the same, with one interesting addition. It noted briefly that Pete Belmonti, an L.A. night club owner, had been questioned at the time of the robbery by the police, their theory being that Belmonti had master-minded the holdup. However, lack of sufficient evidence had forced his release.

I brought out that fancy book of paper matches and laid it on the desk, staring at the embossed cover. In an obscure sort of way I recalled the Kittridge heist. I was trying to bring it into mental focus when a Western Union boy barged in and handed me a yellow envelope. I opened it. The succinct message read:

> Offered big Broadway role. Flying back this afternoon. Don't bother to locate Aunt Eunice. Keep the fee. Vivian Lindsay.

Well, what do you know. Yesterday I had an easy-to-look-at client and even an easier case. Today I had a dull ache near the cervix, a possible involvement with a hostile law enforcement group over a murder, and no client. I glanced up at the numerals denoting the time when the wire had been filed. No doubt, it was just a coincidence but Miss Lindsay had sent this message of termination an hour after the newspapers carrying the Kessler story had appeared on the stands.

What is the perverse attraction about trouble that makes you seek more after it's kicked you in the gut? I should have gone out for a walk, a drive, even a visit to the Rose Exhibit in Coliseum Park. I should have dropped the whole thing and gambled on time and apathy to heal the breach between the Bay Shore police and me. That's what I should have done.

Instead I went downstairs to my Rambler and drove out on Sunset until I reached the 8400 block. Pete Belmonti's Club was a few doors from the corner. I had never visited his place but I'd heard about it. It was one of those smaller spots around town that picked up most of its revenue after legal closing time. Before entering I paused to glance at a group of talent photos displayed in a case outside. There was one that promptly impaled my attention. It featured a statuesque young lady who had little between her and a vice squad save a tiny sequined patch strategically located. She was exchanging a kiss with a white dove perched on her hand. I wondered if she was using that bird to fly to New York. That's what her telegram stated Miss Lindsay was doing at the moment. Or Lili Duveen, as my recent client was billed on the name card under her portrait.

I whistled softly, briefly, then went inside.

There was a decided air of inactivity as though waking time for the place was still hours away. A tubby wistful-eyed bartender out of uniform was sorting bottles. At the far end of the bar, a horse-faced guy, who looked as though he went with the layout, was drinking coffee and reading an afternoon paper. Otherwise the place appeared deserted.

I went over to the polished wood and asked, "Pete Belmonti in?"

The tubby one glanced up from his bottles. "Guess so."

"Like to see him, please."

"Pretty busy. Said he didn't want to be disturbed unless it was real important."

"This is real important."

"Oh." There was a frown of indecision. "Could you give me some idea of what it's about?"

"Sure. An impending funeral."

"Hmmm." The frown took on dimension, then he looked over at the other man questioningly. Horse-face studied me in an indolent way, then slid off the stool. He disappeared behind velvet drapes with a sign over them reading, *Employees Only*.

The bartender resumed his bottle sorting.

6.

A few minutes later the drapes parted. The man who preceded Horse-face was crowding forty, built wide and hard, and there were touches of silver in his thick black hair. There was a more noticeable touch of conceit in his handsome Levantine face. He was creasing an expensive snap-brim felt.

"You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

"Fellow named Kessler."

The man standing behind him, like a dutiful Secret Service agent, reacted more warily than his boss.

Belmonti said, "You mean the one who got into a little trouble last night?"

"If that's what you call having your back probed with an ice-pick."

He shrugged, "Well, I guess there's a moral there somewhere. Like not getting in a hole with your bookie . . . or you're apt to fill it."

The other man thought that was the height of wit. Belmonti continued, shaking his head. "Too bad, though. Jake was all right. Just a weak boy when it came to those bangtails."

I said, "So you knew him pretty well?"

"On and off. Used to work for me at another club I—" A new thought interrupted him. "Say, what's your interest in Kessler?"

"My name's Cotten. I'm a private investigator."

A furry brow arched. The name seemed to register. "You the one who made the afternoon papers?"

"The one."

"Well, I don't know where you figure, Cotten, but I don't think I can help you much. Like I say, Jake

worked for me on and off. Restaurant work, you know. Straight enough guy. Just those horses." He put on his hat, studying himself momentarily in the bar mirror.

"Seen him recently, Belmonti?"

"Not in months. Sort of lost touch."

I looked pointedly at the hardhead behind him. "Think anyone around here might have been over to see him in the last couple of nights?"

"No. Why?"

I came up with the fancy book of matches, with his name embossed on the cover. "These were found in his apartment last night. On the rug."

A dark look started to break through, changed its mind and was washed away with a smooth smile. There was just a little too much smoothness. "We get rid of about fifty thousand of those a year, chum. Guess they even find their way out to Bay Shore. Run a popular place here, you know." He turned to his bartender. "Murph, take care of Mr. Cotten. He's my guest." Then to me, "Sorry, chum. Gotta go now." He started for the door.

I called, "By the way, do you know a woman named Eunice Sigsbee?"

There seemed to be a fraction of arrested motion as his hand pressed against the door. I could have been wrong. That smooth smile came around over his shoulder. "Never heard of her, chum." He went out, followed by his henchman.

Murph said pleasantly, "What'll it be, Mr. Cotten?"

I draped myself over a stool. "Budweiser, please."

He broke out a bottle for me. There was something about his easy manner that suggested he might be conversation-minded. I said, over my glass, "Guess you heard our little interview."

"A fair presumption, Mr. Cotten."

"Did it carry any significance for you?"

He surveyed a glass he was polishing. "Just that you seem to be engaged in some detectivating."

"That's good perceptiveness." I brought out my wallet. "Possibly you might be induced to aid me in my quest for information?"

The wistful eyes latched on the exposed corner of a ten-dollar bill. "Well, sir, you might try me for size."

"Good. What do you know about this Jake Kessler?"

"Just what I read in the paper today. That and his having worked for Mr. Belmonti a couple of years ago."

"Did you ever see him in this place?"

"No, sir."

"Would you know if he was acquainted with Lili Duveen?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't." He looked forlornly at my wallet.

"Well, what do you know about this Duveen girl?"

Reborn hope kindled in his eyes.

"Now there's a talented performer, and I don't mean in front of a spotlight."

"You speak from experience?"

"Observation. Specifically, the way she's hog-tied the boss since she started working here four months ago. If you can call that strip-tease of hers work."

"So he really goes for her?"

"But big. You'd think he had a ring in his nose."

"You say she's been working here for four months. Has that been steady?"

"Never missed a night."

"Uh, huh. Anything else you know about her? Background . . . things like that?"

"Well, I heard she used to work at some of the dives down at the beach. I know she was pinched once." A fresh thought tagged at his pale brows. "Oh, yes — someone tipped me off that she was still married."

I leaned forward. "Oh? You know the husband's name?"

"No, sir. Only thing I heard was — the guy's still in stir."

7.

It wasn't quite noon when I drove out to Miss Sigsbee's address the next morning. It was a frame house that nestled on the side of a hill. Somehow the sparsely settled area had resisted the surging flood of Southland expansion, and it retained a quiet semi-rural atmosphere.

When I pulled up on the opposite side of the street, an overly dressed fortyish woman with firehouse hair and the air of being in a hurry was stooping for a youngster's unenthusiastic kiss.

"'Bye now, honey. Don't wait up for me. Mama won't be home until late."

The woman went through the faded picket gate and walked swiftly to an old Chevy. When I saw it roll down the road I crossed over to the house. The little girl's drooped head snapped up when I approached on the brick walk. She had sad intelligent eyes, and was probably no more than eight, although she had the older look of children who have known and felt neglect.

I smiled, "Hello. Could you tell me if Miss Eunice Sigsbee lives here?"

She gaped, "Gee, that's funny."

"Funny?"

"Yes. Nobody never calls on old Miss Sigsbee. But today lots of people call. First that lady and other man, and now you."

"That so? Maybe they were friends of mine. Was the lady's name Miss Lindsay?"

"I dunno. I was at the store when they came. Mama told me about them. They come all the way from the city, but they didn't get to speak to Miss Sigsbee. When they went down to see her she was sound asleep, so they went home."

"That's too bad. Maybe she's awake now. Could we find out?"

"Okay." She took the lead, hop-skipping a few times as we moved past the side of the house to the rear. She waited for me at the head of a flight of steps leading down to a sort of basement apartment built into the side of the hill. I hadn't noticed it from the street side. She pointed down at the door. "That's where she lives."

I showed some surprise. "Isn't it hard for her to get up and down those steps?"

"Oh, she never comes up. Never. Just stays in her big big bed. Someday Mama's going to get that bed. Miss Sigsbee said so."

She watched me as I descended to the tiny landing. The slope beneath the landing was steeper than Bing Crosby's income tax.

I got an answer on the second knock. "Do come in, please. The door is never locked." It was a voice out of *Gone With the Wind*.

In the half-light I saw the bed first. A vast, solid, rosewood affair that had been built for eternity. It completely dominated the modest-sized room. Above the headboard was hung an oval portrait of General Lee in gray field uniform. Two small Confederate flags festooned the frame.

"He slept right in this bed, you know." There was a hushed reverence in the fluttery voice.

It jolted me into the realization that the bed had an occupant. Decades had done their erosive work on the woman, but something ageless survived in those spirited eyes. I answered, with appropriate reverence of my own. "Oh, is that so, ma'am?"

"Yes. During the terrible siege of Petersburg. He spent two nights at our family home there. It's an heirloom I've always treasured, and I intend to round out my cycle in it." Wistfulness edged the crinkled mouth. "You see, I was born in this bed eighty-one years ago."

"I can hardly believe it. The eighty-one years, that is."

"Flatterer. You must have been raised in the South, too."

"No, ma'am. The only thing remotely southern about me is my name. Even that's spelled differently." I produced my card. An arthritic hand reached for it.

There was an animated glow behind the glass as she studied the card. "How exciting. First time I've ever met a real life detective. Just what brings you calling on me, Mr. Cotten?"

"A little investigative matter. Perhaps you can help me. I believe you once knew a man named Jacob Kessler?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Kessler. How has he been lately?"

Apparently she didn't know. "He seems to have gone on a long trip, ma'am."

"Good. Always told him that's what he needed. Quite nervous, you know."

"I'm sure this trip will take care of his nerves. You knew him well?"

"Indeed. We once all lived in the same apartment house at Bay Shore."

"All of you?"

"In a manner of speaking. Mr. Cusso shared his room, but their good friend spent a lot of his time there, too. Mr. Whitey Bronson. Very attentive gentleman, Mr. Bronson."

"Name sounds familiar. Baseball player, wasn't he?"

"Dear me, no. This one was a cabinet maker by trade. Did splendid work. Unfortunately, he got into some trouble before I left."

"Really?"

The expression became highly confidential. "Yes. They sent him to the penitentiary, poor boy. You know, it's time I wrote him again and told him I've moved. He did so many nice little things for me. Made a new frame for the general's picture. Rebuilt the bottom of this bed . . . so many kind favors. Must be hard on his wife, too. Poor thing."

That last practically converted my ears into radar. "Ah, yes. The poor loved ones waiting outside. Uh — you knew Mrs. Bronson, of course?"

"No, I never did get to meet her in person. I remember Mr. Bronson visiting me one day . . . that was about two months before that trouble he got into . . . and telling me he was going to Las Vegas to marry the most wonderful girl, over the week-end. He needed a little extra money for the trip which I loaned to him. I saw him a few times after that, but he never brought his wife along. I believe he explained she was dancing in Las Vegas and didn't have much time off to visit him here."

I prodded gently but there was nothing else the old gal could remember from Bronson's remarks concerning his wife. There was still one more question on the agenda.

"By the way, ma'am, are these relatives with whom you're living here?"

"No, dear boy. I just rent this room from Mrs. Platski." That fragile smile again. "You are gazing at the last to bear the illustrious Sigsbee name. The very last."

"Not even a distant relative?"

"Just a grand-niece. But she's a Lindsay, really. I haven't seen her in years. Not since she was a pink-cheeked little angel. My goodness, this is the first time I've even mentioned Vivian since I last saw Mr. Bronson." The parchment lids were drooping now. "You will have to pardon me, Mr. Cotten. The old grow tired so soon." She started to raise her hand in a gesture of farewell. When it dropped to the coverlet, Miss Sigsbee was asleep.

I went to the door, closing it ever so softly behind me.

8.

I like to sleep late Sunday mornings.

At eleven o'clock the automatic radio switched on and the broad-

caster's voice lapped against my half-wakefulness. There was a montage of personalities, places and troubles in the world that didn't quite get through to me. His voice would have probably lulled me back into unconsciousness if he hadn't repeated the name.

". . . . daughter of Confederate General Horatio Sigsbee, she was the last to bear the famous name. The sheriff's office announced that the 81-year-old woman, whose body was found early this morning in the brush far below her hillside apartment at Fairhaven, was apparently the victim of an accidental fall resulting from Miss Sigsbee's effort to close her window during the night. No inquest has been ordered. And now, folks, just a word about Dr. Littleton's magic pills for stomach —"

I jumped out of bed and put an end to that irreverent note. Despite my having cut him off, the announcer's voice continued to echo inside my head. There was a feeling of unreality and disbelief that I couldn't shake, more so because I had visited with Eunice Emmet Sigsbee less than twenty-four hours ago. Seemed like everyone I was visiting these days wound up on an embalmer's work table. Then I remembered something equally disquieting. I had left my business card with the old gal yesterday. If it turned up and the boys at the sheriff's office compared notes with Lieutenant Harlow and his crowd, my future was about as cheerful as a flag at half-mast.

My thoughts were scraping bottom, long after my second cup of coffee. Once I glanced down at the pictures I was doodling on the back of a letter-head. There was a series of beds. Big old-fashioned beds. I stared at them dully for a while, the beds suggesting nothing more than the usual evil Cotten mind. Then their significance suddenly boomed at me, and there was an exultant noise in my ears like silver dollars tumbling from a jackpot. Boy, had I been slow on the upbeat this morning!

Scarcely more than an hour later I pulled up in front of the frame house that had served as Eunice Sigsbee's final residence. The same little girl was weeding a flower bed. She came erect at the sound of my tread on the walk. Recent shock still glimmered in her eyes. "Mrs. Sigsbee's dead."

"Yes. I heard it on the radio."

"I found her, you know."

"You did?"

"Yes. Down on the rocks." She pointed toward the slope at the rear. "Her head was all mushed up terrible. I screamed."

I put my arm around her shoulder. "You musn't think about it, honey."

She nodded, "That's what the policeman said, too. After they took her away."

"He was right. Is your mother home?"

"No. A friend just called for her. A man friend."

"Well, I guess she wouldn't mind if I just went down and took a look at Mrs. Sigsbee's room."

"I s'pose not."

She followed me to the head of the stairs, remaining there while I descended to the late Mrs. Sigsbee's apartment. This time there was no need to observe the proprieties. I opened without knocking.

I sensed the void in that room before my eyes had adjusted themselves to the contrasting darkness. It was a disturbingly big void. At that instant it seemed big enough to accommodate a drive-in movie. I stepped quickly outside.

"What happened to Mrs. Sigsbee's bed, honey?" I tried to appear unconcerned.

She swung playfully on the top rail. "Mama sold it."

"*Sold* it?"

"Uh, huh. Mrs. Sigsbee always said Mama could have the bed if anything happened."

I was up the stairs now. "But it's around the place, isn't it? After all, she just died."

"No, they took it away."

"The police?

"Oh, no. The two men in the truck. They told Mama they were looking for old furniture. They gave her a hundred dollars. Gee, Mama was awful happy. Maybe now she'll buy me that—"

I shook her more roughly than I intended. "Think hard now. What kind of a truck? It's important."

"Red truck." Her eyes were apprehensive now. "Red truck with a fish painted on it."

"How long ago were they here?"

"'Bout fifteen minutes ago. Mama left right after they paid her."

"Thanks, honey." I patted her head then sprinted for my car.

9.

Red truck with a fish. Not much of a lead. Besides, they had a fifteen-minute jump on me to get back to Los Angeles. Even that destination was pure assumption.

At least I had a break in the Sunday traffic. Most of it was on the opposite side of the highway, headed out for the beaches. I kept my pedal close to the floorboard, and my mind on that youngster's vague description. I picked up six or seven trucks in the first twenty minutes. Only one was red. There was no fish painted on it, and it was loaded down with beer.

I had covered more than half the distance back to L.A., and I was beginning to wonder if I wasn't following something fresh out of a kid's imagination. Then it hit me. Sure, that's just the way they'd play it. Rent one of those "Drive-It-Yourself" trucks. I remembered there was a large Hollywood outfit in the car rental business known as Fish Brothers. My hopes went up a few points.

That was nothing compared to the bull market they enjoyed when I approached the tracks that intersect Western Avenue. A line of vehicles had halted for a passing freight. The last on line was a red truck.

A large golden fish was painted across the tail-board.

I pulled up behind the truck before the box-cars had cleared the intersection. It was a medium-size job, open at the top. It may have been my imagination but the bulky concealing tarpaulin, silhoutted like a huge knocked-down bed. When the truck got under way again I didn't exactly lock bumpers with it, but I managed to keep it in range all the way into Hollywood. Once, I drew ahead briefly in order to get a fast lateral look at the driver. I couldn't make him, but there was no trouble recognizing the other man on the seat. He was the same horse-faced character I'd run into at Pete Belmonti's place the other afternoon.

The way I felt now, the fellow's sadistic puss was positively glamorous.

It was around two-thirty when I sensed the cavalcade had finally reached its destination. The truck turned into an alley a couple of blocks down the hill from Belmonti's place on Sunset. About a hundred feet in it stopped in front of a narrow three-storey warehouse building. A sign across the pair of iron doors read: *Napa Food Products.*

There was a gas station on the corner, that backed up to the alley. I rolled in stopping in front of what was billed as the lubritorium. There was another car on the rack.

The attendant under it, called, "Grease job?"

I nodded.

"Just be another ten minutes, sir."

I stepped out. "No rush. I'll call back in about an hour." I headed for a pair of rest rooms at the rear. Being a creature of habit I entered the one with the appropriate marking.

A casement frosted window opened on the alley. I adjusted it so that I could safely watch the activity in front of the warehouse. The doors were open now, and the two men were hauling a section of the cargo inside. It was Mrs. Sigsbee's bed, all right. When they had disappeared inside with the last piece, I stepped out of the wash room and sauntered toward the alley. Except for the rented truck the alley had that look of Sunday loneliness.

I moved casually past the front of the truck. The whine of a slowly ascending freight elevator drifted out from beyond the warehouse doors. That seemed to account for the current whereabouts of the pair I had tailed here. If I was figuring on making the business side of that warehouse this looked like the time to make my move.

I went up the three steps to the loading dock, then stepped inside the building. Whatever the operators were storing here, it was mostly

in case lots and barrels. They rose in tiers that lost themselves in the shadows. The whining sound had stopped now, and in its place there was the creaking of distant boards, as though something heavy were being rolled across the top floor.

I moved back into a cluster of hogshead that had the smell of a far-off land, and waited. Five minutes later the elevator started its return trip. I heard the men step off and walk to the alley entrance. There was the scrape of iron doors closing, then a heavy bolt was pushed into place.

The light was as vague as a politician's promise now. I waited until the sound of the truck disappeared down the alley, then I worked my way to the rear, deciding on the stairs instead of the elevator. It seemed like a more quiet method of ascent. The fact that those two birds had locked the street doors didn't rule out the possibility of someone else being around the place.

The odds seemed to be against that when I finally made the top floor. Except for a thin sliver of it seeping through barred shutters in the wall of the elevator shaft, there was practically no light now. I flicked on my small pocket flash and probed some of the immediate area. There was the same array of merchandise piled in case lots and barrels. Not quite as many, perhaps, as downstairs. What appeared to be a work-bench showed against one wall.

I advanced slowly toward the front. Halfway, my finger of light etched an upended section of Mrs. Sigsbee's bed. The massive segments were stacked against a concrete partition. That took the caution out of my feet. The first piece I examined was the footboard. Despite its unusual thickness there was nothing about it to suggest it contained the answer to my search. I went over the vast intricately carved headboard, like a bloodhound in a roadshow of Uncle Tom's Cabin. All that got me was a pulled back muscle. Then I remembered something the old gal had said about the bottom of her bed. Something in the way of repair work that had been performed on it while living over at that Bay Shore apartment.

Unlike most beds the bottom of this museum piece wasn't formed by fitting side pieces into the front and back sections. It was a complete unit, apparently designed to store bedding or hide Confederate generals. This one was large enough to conceal an entire staff. Its underside was resting against the wall. After some protracted and painful maneuvering I finally had it reversed and lowered to the floor. By now I was sufficiently familiar with Mrs. Sigsbee's bed to sense that the wood on the bottom was not the original. It also lacked the feel of solidity that characterized the rest of the bed. When some knuckle-thumping on the wood produced a hollow effect, I made a beeline for the workbench. I came back with a hammer and chisel.

Assuming it to be a false bottom, and my hopes all merged in that direction, it had been built with considerable skill. After five minutes of hammering I managed to pry loose a section of the marine plywood. There was just enough room to introduce an over-anxious hand. The first thing it contacted was newspaper stuffing. The crumpled sheets carried a promising note. They all had a year-old dateline. I made another pass under the raised wood. This time I contacted something with a more substantial feel. A carefully wrapped bundle, about the size that would accommodate a stack of currency. And I didn't think it would prove to be of Confederate issue. Probing further I got the impression of a five-o'clock traffic jam in bundles. I withdrew the first one. I had just ripped open a portion of the wrapper when two sudden and extreme changes developed, both as to illumination and sound. A ceiling light bathed me in a disturbing incandescence, and I heard a voice somewhere to my rear.

"Get up slow. Real slow. And start reaching for clouds." His voice had the friendly ring of a freshly-honed guillotine. I followed instructions to the letter. In rising I was able to manage a careful sidelong glance toward the head of the stairs. Pete Belmonti was standing there, near a light switch. There was a snub-nosed gun in his hand, and he had company. The redhead was wearing slanted dark cheaters, but there was no mistaking that strip-tease figure. There was a slant to her grin, too. A slender indefinite kind of a grin. With all that racket I'd been making, it was small wonder they'd been able to slip up this way. The man started to move in my direction. When he was close behind me, he said, "Fooled me the other day. You almost had me thinking you had brains."

I shrugged, "If I had any I wouldn't be in the investigating business."

"Well, don't worry, chum. You won't be in it long." The sharp prod in my back gave emphasis to his last word. Belmonti's disengaged hand started a frisking movement.

I looked straight ahead at a long narrow packing case, stamped *Imported Olive Oil*. It was just the convenient size for some types of exporting, too. Like shipping a dead body. I bit the inside lining of my lip.

When he was finally convinced I wasn't carrying a concealed burp-gun, he said, "Okay, sweetheart, let's get going. Straight ahead." The muzzle of his .38 dug a little deeper into the small of my back.

"Sure."

I started forward in a rather resigned shuffle. Then I wheeled faster than Jesse James stumbling into a posse. Inward and toward my left, my arm passing over his right forearm. Close to the wrist. My left hand came under and up to my chest. All the pressure inside. The

only thing he could shoot now was a case of sardines behind me.

That brought us face to face. At the same instant that I started to knee him where it hurts most, there was a pair of quick-order explosions. His stomach arched against me, there was a terrible gasp, and I heard his gun bounce off the floor in a nearby aisle. I disengaged my grip and dove into the same aisle.

I heard him moan from the floor, "You shot me, Lili. You shot —"

"I'm sorry, Petey. I was just trying to protect you." She sounded as sorry as a finance company collecting interest. I called out, "She's lying, Belmonti. She gave you the double-whammy just like she gave it to her husband, Whitey Bronson. You didn't stand a chance in hell of divvying up that two hundred grand. She's that kind." I leaned over for his .38, which was lying near my shoe.

She purred, "Now, you don't really believe that, darling?"

The dying man tried desperately to lift his face a few inches from the flooring. Only his head and one outstretched hand were visible from where I stood. The taut flexed fingers just missed touching the torn bundle of currency near the bed.

He finally managed to say, "You . . . dirty little —" The rest was blue-pencilled by eternity.

"Famous last words. Eh, Lili?"

She snapped her head in the direction where she figured I was holed up. Anger pinched her mouth, but only momentarily. Then it eased back into that vague grin. I watched her through a tiny air space. She was wearing one of those turtleneck sweaters again, tucked in snug for that two-pronged effect. A tooled leather bag slung over one shoulder had apparently housed the small revolver she was still toting.

She said, "I'm in a strangely good mood right now. We'll overlook that remark. Suppose you come out of hiding, lover man, and we'll talk this thing over."

"Over my dead body, presumably."

"No woman in her right mind would want to see *your* body dead."

The seductive undertone was supposed to make me crawl out and roll over. She was moving now in an unhurried casual way toward the bed. Her gun arm was relaxed. Too relaxed. I had a fleeting vision of a fine old Southern lady's face, and I suddenly sensed the depth of my loathing for this redheaded killer. Not because she'd just dumped a pair of slugs into a guy like Belmonti. It was the unremitting jungle quality of the girl, that would have sent the average panther slinking away with an inferiority complex.

I thought: Okay, Miss Duveen. None of us is too far removed from the jungle, at that.

I timed my own movements so that I had slipped behind a protective screen of beer cases when she looked into the aisle. The light was gloomier in there.

She said, "Well, come on now. Don't keep me waiting."

I let her wait.

"Don't tell me you're going chicken on me, lover man. I haven't any reason to let go at you."

"Yeah, but I have."

The flat steely tone of my voice surprised her. I knew that until now she was unaware I'd latched onto Belmonti's Detective Special. There was an apprehensive movement of her own gun hand.

"I don't get you." She was trying to locate me.

I drew a careful bead on a point two inches to her left. It made a hell of a roar in that aisle, and she fell back against a barrel, firing wildly. When she was through there was just one bullet left in Miss Duveen's revolver.

10.

By now I'd worked my way to a position where I could cover the open area leading back to the stairs. When the echo of artillery finally faded, I heard the stepped-up beat of her tense breathing. For a couple of seconds that was the only sound in the big room. Then there was the delicate tiptoe of leather on hardwood. I waited in my crouched position until her cautious reappearance in the main aisle. Then I let go with another, close enough to bring the answering shot I wanted. She obliged. There was the shatter of glass in a case above me. I didn't mind the slight shower of wine vinegar. Not at all.

I joined her out there under the light. For one micrometer of a second I hoped my arithmetic hadn't gone rusty. The muzzle of her .32 was right on target with my navel. There was a reassuring pair of dry clicks.

I half-smiled, "Six, Lili. That's all they hold. Looks like you just ran out of ammo."

Her lower lip quivered briefly as she gaped down at her empty firing-piece. Then she let the gun slip out of her hand, and she managed to flash a disarming smile. "Gee, I'm glad it was empty. You're the last man in the world I would have wanted to shoot."

"Yeah. I'll bet you would have gone all to pieces."

The smile saddened. "I don't expect you to believe that, Neal." She started to close the gap between us. "But ever since that first day I met you —" That two-pronged sweater was hard against me now. One sleeveless arm started to glide around my neck. The rest was a whisper. "— Just thinking of you starts a fire in me."

I waited until she added some follow-through to that hold. Then I said, "You making a proposition?"

"Just name it, darling."

"Okay. Then suppose you start putting it all down in writing."

"Put what down?"

"The details. The dainty little details about the other two murders

you engineered to get your talons on Whitey's loot."

The sweater backed away from me abruptly. Charm school was out now. There was just a hardness. A hardness etched with a cagey gleam. "What are you trying to hand me?"

"The only thing you can't knife in the back, Lili. The truth. You want to put it down yourself, or would you prefer to have me dictate it for you?"

"You can shove it, little man." It was wrapped in a sneer. "Now you better be out of here in thirty seconds flat, if you know what's good for you." She started for a nearby phone nestled on a small shelf.

"You'll never make that phone, Lili."

It was the way I said it that made her turn very slowly. The fear was in her eyes even before they drifted down to the .38 I'd whipped out again.

"You're not the kind that shoots a woman, Neal."

"That's right. But you weren't around when they passed out the instincts of a woman."

I watched the nervous dance of her throat muscles. "Please don't."

"Then talk it up."

"What can I tell you? The whole thing was Pete Belmonti's idea. Honest —"

"You're lying through your teeth." I inched in on her. "Okay, Lili, start backing up while I knock off a shooting script for you."

Her glance clinging to the snub-nosed barrel, the redhead took a few tentative steps backward.

I continued, "With the long stretch he'd pulled at Folsom, Whitey Bronson finally figured it was about time he tried to buy his way out. There are some public servants in this state who'll help spring a con for a lot less than the kind of money he had stashed away. So he probably wrote to you, divulging that he'd hidden the currency in Mrs. Sigsbee's bed. What he didn't know was that the old lady had moved away from Bay Shore. He missed on another point, too. His dear little wife's faithfulness. Right, Lili?"

"It's your story. You can figure anything you want."

"I see. Well, let's figure you developed some quaint ideas of your own on how to put that kind of spending money to use. And they didn't include Whitey. You and Belmonti happen to be doing some light housekeeping together. So you cut him in on the secret. After all, you need a partner for this kind of a job, even though your plans call for a temporary partnership, as we've just seen. Now you have to find Mrs. Sigsbee. That's where I fade in to the picture. Lucky me. A nice easy fifty bucks."

From somewhere down the boulevard there came the rise and fall of an approaching siren. It could be an ambulance headed for the usual Sunday traffic smash-up, but if the boys over at the gas station had

heard the shots, chances favored a visit from the law.

She said, "There's fifty grand in it for you, if you'll just use your head."

"Way under the market, Lili. But let's move along. In my search for your alleged aunt I ran into Jake Kessler. I guess he put two and two together and hustled over to Belmonti, not knowing the guy was in cahoots with you. An unanticipated problem but you solved it very competently. First Pete gets him to confide the old lady's address, then you two make him a return visit. That ice-pick in Kessler's back was just the right touch." I nodded at her shoulder-bag. "By the way, do you carry a spare in that arsenal of yours?"

There was a little nerve spasm now in her cheek. "Just dream talk. You could never make it stick."

We were closing in on the rear wall. The girl's back was on a direct line with the elevator shaft. I had noticed something about that shaft before we started our walk. "With your signed confession I could. You see, I can place you at the old woman's rented room as recently as yesterday. That's recent as hell, Lili."

"You crazy? You saw what the papers said about the old bag's death. Now will you call this off before I trip down the stairs?"

"There aren't any stairs behind you, Lili."

There was a frown of incomprehension, so I added, "Take a look."

Her head swiveled carefully, then it stopped as though emergency brakes had been applied. Shock stiffened that beautiful body for an instant, then it seemed to go all lax as her face came around again. It was a face immersed in a single compelling emotion. Panic. Miss Duveen had just glanced down into the elevator shaft which was precisely eighteen inches to her rear. Her reaction was understandable. The men who had used the elevator previously had neglected to replace the safety cable across the opening.

"No . . . no. For God's sake, I'm only a woman, Neal. You can't, you can't —" Somebody with double-duty shoes was barreling up those stairs.

"Why not? Isn't this what you did to a fine old lady? And she had a better claim to life, at her age, then you have right now."

"Please . . . please . . ."

She started to sway toward me, then her legs gave way and she went to the floor. The rush of convulsive words was almost smothered by the arm that cradled her averted face. "All right, all right. I pushed her out the window. Only don't make me go down there. Don't . . . don't. . . ."

I nodded recognition to the hard-breathing cop standing at the head of the stairway. Then my glance drifted past the redhead's body, down into the shaft.

I wondered what I would have done in that last second.

Portrait of a Killer

No. 21 — James Crawford

BY DAN SONTUP

HE WORKED as a male attendant in an insane asylum, but it'd be pretty safe to say that Jim Crawford belonged on the other side of the fence — as an inmate instead of a keeper.

To everyone about him, though, he appeared to be a perfectly normal young man. The only apparent flaw in his character was that he was just too impatient. He was always in a hurry, always in a rush to get some place, always anxious to get things over and done with. Out of this vast impatience grew two love affairs, one marriage, one hammer-killing, and one fatal shooting.

It all began when Jim made the ideal discovery for a man of his inclinations — a secret place on a mountain top near the asylum. It was the perfect spot for lovemaking, and that's just what Jim wanted. He had found a small, hidden clearing on the mountain, a spot that couldn't be seen unless you were standing right on top of it, and which could be reached only by treading a very narrow and dangerous path along the top of the mountain. It was hard work to get up there, but it was worth it to Jim. His little nest on the mountain was remote, private, and full of potential for the right man. Jim was that man.

The first thing he did was to contact a girl he was going with at the time. She was Lillian White, a waitress, and it didn't take much persuasion on the part of Jim to convince her that his mountain top hideaway was the one spot where they could sit and talk and enjoy themselves without danger of interruption.

Lillian was a bit scared on her first trip up there, but it was the treacherous climb that frightened her and not Jim. Jim soon soothed her fears away, though, and Lillian was as taken with the place as he was. Everything went along just fine, and the trip was repeated many times. In order to keep the local gossips from catching wise when seeing both of them travel up the mountain together, Jim arranged a method whereby they could go up separately.

Near his hideaway, he had a long pole with a white cloth tied to one end. On those nights when he and Lillian were supposed to meet, Jim would go first. Then, when he got there, he'd take the pole and wave it slowly back and forth. Lillian, who

had been sitting by her window down in the valley, would see the white cloth waving high up on the mountain, and that would be her signal to leave and join Jim.

To Lillian, the whole arrangement could have gone on forever, but Jim, true to his impatient nature, had other plans. First of all, he was getting a bit tired of climbing up the mountain each time he wanted to make love — the novelty had begun to wear off. Next, he was also getting just a bit tired of Lillian; and, finally, he had marriage on his mind — to another girl he had met since taking up with Lillian.

He tried to back out of the affair with Lillian quickly but gracefully, but that's where Lillian fooled him. She brought Jim the surprising and disquieting news that he was scheduled to be a father.

Jim thought this over for a while and decided on the quickest way out of things — to get rid of Lillian. It didn't matter to him that his right hand was useless to him, being heavily bandaged because of an infection. It didn't matter that he probably could have waited things out and perhaps found some other way out of his predicament. He was a young man in a hurry, and so Lillian had to go right away.

He went to see her, put on a big act of being in love with her and promising to do "the right thing" by her, and he asked her to meet him on the mountain that night where they could talk things over in private. So, once more, and for the last time, Jim climbed the mountain alone and gave the signal for Lillian to follow him. The one difference between this time and all the others was that Jim had a hammer tucked into his belt.

When Lillian finally arrived, Jim didn't waste any time. The first time Lillian turned her back on him, Jim took the hammer from his belt, raised it high over his head, and with three quick but powerful blows to her head, he solved the problem of what to do about Lillian.

He went back down the mountain in a hurry, leaving her dead body behind in the secret hideaway. Still in a hurry, he made arrangements for a hasty wedding and, two days after he had killed Lillian, he married the other girl, this one a nurse from the asylum. He talked her into leaving town right away, and, naturally, didn't let her know that she had married a murderer.

Things slowed down a bit now. Lillian's body lay in the hideaway without being discovered, and Jim and his wife lived together as a happily married couple. This perfect state of affairs didn't last too long, though. Jim soon started looking around for another woman, and just about the time he found her, someone also found Lillian.

About all that was left of Lillian now was a skeleton, but the police tackled the job of identifying her, tracking down the meager clues they had, until all evidence pointed to

Jim as the killer. Then they started the routine, tiresome, painstaking work of hunting him down.

Jim gave them a big assist in this task — he killed another woman. It was the new girl he had found when he tired of his wife, and Jim was less imaginative about killing her than he had been with Lillian — he used a gun this time and merely shot her to death.

He managed to elude the police one more time, but they were closing in on him fast, and this time they got him.

It wasn't in Jim's nature to stall things along, so he confessed quickly as soon as the police nabbed him. He was still in a hurry. In fact, he was so impatient that he didn't even wait to be executed — he committed suicide while still in jail.

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American Cancer Society

Sylvia

He had to protect the man he hated. He knew that as soon as he saw the gun in his daughter's room.

BY IRA LEVIN

SHORTLY before noon on the day of his scheduled departure for the Italian Riviera, Lewis Melton searched his daughter's room for a letter she had received a few hours earlier. This secret violation of Sylvia's privacy was performed with reluctance. Like every act it was the result of a somewhat involved set of circumstances and motivations.

A month before, Sylvia had been granted a divorce. Her husband, Lyle Waterman, had been a fortune hunter — a fact which, though obvious to everyone else, had not been demonstrable to Sylvia until he was caught red-handed tracing her endorsement onto an intercepted divi-

dend check. When this happened Melton made a bargain with his son-in-law; Melton would not press a charge of forgery and Waterman would not contest a Nevada mental cruelty divorce. Melton, who was retired, then accompanied Sylvia to a dude ranch outside Reno, where in the usual six weeks the divorce was accomplished.

Back again in Connecticut Melton succumbed to the idea of a few weeks on the Riviera, a suggestion of Sylvia's. The year before, returning from two months abroad to find Sylvia married to Waterman, Melton had been forced to recognize that despite her thirty-two years it was unwise to leave her alone for long periods of time, and he had resolved to avoid doing so in the future. But his relief at Sylvia's freedom, coupled with her expressed desire for solitude, had erased his resolution and lulled him into booking air passage, renewing his passport, contacting acquaintances in San Remo — and now, on the very day of departure, Mrs. Redden, bringing the coffee into his bedroom, had said, "Redden thinks I should tell you, sir, that Miss Sylvia just got a letter addressed in Mr. Waterman's handwriting" — and immediately the whole trip was subject to cancellation.

A letter from Lyle might be harmless; a request, perhaps, for the forwarding of some clothes he had left behind. But it might also be the first step in a brazen campaign to reestablish his influence over Sylvia, undertaken in the knowledge of Melton's planned absence. If that were the case the trip was certainly out of the question, for Sylvia was as easily led as a child's pony. Furthermore, Melton suddenly realized, her habitual demeanor of withdrawn silence, which had deepened since the moment when she learned the truth about Lyle, had effectually masked what emotions might lie within her, and he really had no way of knowing whether her love for Lyle had turned to bitterness, as he had assumed, or whether there might not linger an inclination to forgive, an eagerness to accept any explanation . . .

Desultorily he began his packing, almost certain that the suitcases would have to be unpacked before the day was over. At eleven-thirty, when Sylvia retired to her garden at the rear of the estate, Melton entered her room and began to search for the letter.

In the course of the search he came upon a gun. He had opened a quilted satin box in the top drawer of her dresser and had riffled the edges of the handkerchiefs stacked within it. They parted in mid-pile. He lifted off the upper stack and there it was; a small nickel-plated pistol with a black bakelite grip, incredible upon the soft cushion of Sylvia's flowered handkerchiefs Melton looked at it, his right hand blindly depositing handkerchiefs on the dresser, thinking: *It must be a*

joke or a cigarette lighter or something.

He picked it up. It was heavier than it looked; certainly no cigarette lighter. He held it disbelievingly on the flat of his palm. The bakelite grip was milled in a pattern of tiny diamonds. The short barrel gleamed with an oily sheen, smooth to the fingertips, the whole having an indefinable smell of newness. Where had she gotten it? Reno? The fool! a gun. . . . Events of the past month suddenly sprang into a new and frightening significance. "You really do need a rest," she had said. "The Mallinsons are still in San Remo, aren't they?"

"Well . . . yes. I suppose we *could* leave on the —"

"Not we. You go alone. Honestly, I think being here by myself for a while would be the best thing."

And he had let her talk him into it!

"About the Reddens," she had said later. "We might as well give them their vacation while you're away. I can fend for myself, and then you won't have to put up with a few weeks of canned food later on. I really think that being completely by myself . . ."

Knowing that each of his previous absences had been the occasion for some sort of irresponsible behavior on her part, he had still let her talk him into it! So lulled, so blind!

He found the way to open the gun; the bakelite plaque on the right side swung clockwise, revealing within the handle a vertical metal rack holding five small bullets ready to be pushed up in turn into the firing chamber. Melton shuddered and swung the plaque back down, wishing he could as easily replace Sylvia's mask of stolidity which, penetrated, had disclosed such unsuspected depth of feeling, love warped into such pathetically intense hatred.

The letter from Lyle . . . Melton set the gun carefully upon the dresser and, with an aggrieved headshake, returned his attention to the handkerchief box. He found the letter almost immediately; it was beneath the uppermost handkerchief, the one on which the gun had lain. The envelope, ripped open at one end, was addressed to Sylvia in Lyle's bold, affectedly masculine hand.

Melton drew out a single sheet of paper and unfolded it. It was the stationery of an unfamiliar hotel on West 54th Street in New York. Dated the day before, it read:

Syl darling,

How can I tell you how happy your sweet letter has made me? I can't — not on paper. But when I see you, darling!

Lewis's plane leaves at midnight, so I suppose the train you are driving him to will be the 9:01. I will take the 8:00 from N. Y. which will get me into New Haven at 9:35, so you will only have to wait in the station half an hour.

Until tomorrow night, darling —

Always your loving

Lyle

Melton read the letter twice, then folded it back into its envelope. He picked up the gun and stood with the letter in one hand and the gun in the other, staring at them, thinking that Lyle, poor Lyle, with his scheming and conniving, wasn't truly dangerous at all; but Sylvia, slow, quiet Sylvia . . .

He put the letter back on the handkerchiefs in the box, covered it with the single one, and put the gun on top of that. He replaced the other handkerchiefs, closed the box and closed the drawer. With his hands braced on the top of the dresser, he leaned forward, resting his suddenly tired weight upon them. Slow, quiet Sylvia . . .

He straightened up and stared unseeingly at his reflection in the mirror. After a moment he turned and walked quickly from the room.

He went back into his own room and to the telephone beside the bed. A call to Information supplied him with the number of the hotel on West 54th Street. He relayed it to the operator along with his own number and stood waiting, his eyes on Sylvia's photograph on the bedside table, until a female voice small in his ear slurred the name of the hotel into an unintelligible syllable.

"Lyle Waterman, please," Melton said. Again he waited, searching for words that would not sound melodramatic. After a moment there was the sound of a receiver being lifted and Lyle's voice said, "Hello?" — thick, cut out of a yawn.

"Lyle? This is Lewis."

"Well. What a *lovely* way to start the day."

"Lyle, I have to speak to you." There was a moment of silence. "You mustn't come up here tonight. Sylvia —"

Angrily Lyle said, "Been reading Sylvia's mail?"

"Lyle, she's —"

"Let me speak to Sylvia."

"She isn't in the house. She —"

Lyle hung up.

Melton jiggled the crossbar and got the operator back. He told her he had been disconnected and she put the call through again.

"Mr. Waterman doesn't answer," the girl in the hotel said.

"This is a matter of life and death," Melton said. "Literally of life and death."

"I'll try again," the girl said nervously.

She tried again, but there was no response. "Should I send one of the boys up?"

"No. Never mind." Melton hung up.

He rang for Redden and took off his sport shirt. He put on a white shirt and was knotting his tie when Redden came in. Melton told him to bring the Lincoln around front. He ran a comb through his white hair and took a tweed jacket from the closet.

When he descended the stairs into the hall, Mrs. Redden was on a stepladder polishing the mirror with a ball of wadded newspaper. Melton

said, "Tell Sylvia I was called into New York on some business. I'll be back at five or so." He straightened his tie in the mirror. "I want you to take all the phone calls this afternoon, Mrs. Redden," he said. "If Mr. Waterman calls — you'll know his voice, won't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him that Sylvia's in New Haven. He's been bothering her."

"Yes, sir," Mrs. Redden said.

Melton went briskly out into the graveled drive, where Redden was holding open the driver's door of the Lincoln.

At a quarter past two Melton parked the car in a lot on West 53rd Street and walked around the block to Lyle's hotel. It was a shabby building with a blue neon sign — *Transients* — glowing dispiritedly in the bright sunlight. The lobby was dim, with sagging leather chairs and the smell of rubber floormats. There was a quarter-circle desk in one corner and behind it, in a nest of pigeonholes, a round-faced man with no facial hair whatsoever and an embarrassingly obvious wig. Melton asked him for Lyle Waterman.

"He's out," the man said.

"What room is he in?"

"Three-fourteen, but he's out. You can't go up."

"Did he tell you to say he was out?"

"He's out," the man said. He pointed to the 314 pigeonhole; a brick-colored key tag hung from it. "He went out about an hour ago."

"Did he leave any word as to when he'd be back?"

"No word," the man said. "He just went out."

Melton sat down in one of the leather club chairs, across from two dark-skinned men speaking machine gun Spanish. The chair was too deep for comfort and there was a fetid cigar butt in the pot of sand beside it. After a few minutes Melton pulled himself up, went to the newsstand and bought a *Journal-American*. In a different chair, which was just as bad, he sat skimming the newspaper, glancing up at each sibilant push of the revolving door.

Lyle came in at twenty after three, his finger hooking a paper-sheathed clothes hanger over his shoulder. Melton stood up. Lyle paused for a moment, staring at him, and then he continued on his way towards the desk, his lips clamped and his thick-lashed eyes narrowed, like a spoiled child going up to bed without his dinner. Melton intercepted him and caught his free arm, gripping it tight in a sudden burst of hatred. "Let go of me!" Lyle whispered.

Melton took a deep breath and, with urgent emphasis, said, "I have to speak to you."

"Let *go* of me."

Melton released his arm.

"Go on," Lyle said, not looking at Melton, "speak. I can hardly wait."

"Not here," Melton said.

"Look, if you —"

"I drove all the way for this, Lyle. Not for my sake; for yours."

Lyle's mouth worked peevishly, and finally he said, "Oh, hell," and went resignedly to the desk to collect his key. Melton followed him. Waiting for the elevator Melton saw that Lyle had just had a haircut; bits of black hair clung to the back of his shirt collar.

They rode up to the third floor and walked along a narrow corridor whose floor creaked under thin carpet. Lyle unlocked 314. "The presidential suite," he said wryly, pushing open the door and going in. Melton followed him and closed the door. Lyle hooked the clothes hanger on a partially opened closet door. "*House Beautiful* is taking pictures next Tuesday," he said.

The room was small and crowded. There were a bureau, a writing table and a sink squeezed together against one wall, and jutting at them from the wall opposite, twin beds separated by a night table with a spindly white lamp. The single window, in the central wall, had a buff shade and a green one, but no curtains. The beds were metal, painted to look like wood. On the one nearer the window lay a gray leather suitcase with white whipcord stitching and L.W. in small gold letters.

Lyle sat down on the other bed, then swung himself out full length, his hands cupping his head on the pillow, his heels pushing ripples into the faded peach bedspread. He lay looking at the ceiling, blinking occasionally, as though he were completely alone.

Melton drew a chair from the writing table, turned it to face the beds, and sat down.

"Before I tell you what I have to tell you," he said, "I want you to bear in mind that Sylvia is thirty-three years old, that she was thirty-two when you married her, and that she had never been in love before."

Lyle closed his eyes.

"You should also know," Melton said, "that her face, when she was shown your little penmanship exercise on the back of her check, was not a very pleasant face to behold. It was like watching a human being turn into a statue. And she's remained that way. She holds a book in front of her but she doesn't read. Or she goes into her garden and presses earth around flowers that are already dead."

A deep breath lifted Lyle's chest and sighed out from his nostrils.

"I think she has it in her mind to kill you tonight," Melton said. "There's a gun in the top drawer of her dresser."

Lyle's eyes opened.

"I assume she bought it in Reno."

Lyle raised himself on his elbows and looked at Melton. After a moment he said, "You're making this up."

Sharply Melton said, "Oh, yes. I go around telling people that my daughter is contemplating murder." He stared contemptuously at Lyle, and then sank back in his chair.

"This trip of mine," he said. "It was Sylvia's idea. And the Reddens are leaving for Vermont tonight. Immediately after dinner. That was Sylvia's idea too."

Lyle said, "She didn't tell me the Reddens would be away . . ." He swung his legs off the bed and sat leaning forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in space.

"What *did* she tell you?"

Lyle rubbed the heels of his clasped hands together.

Melton said, "For pity's sake, there's a *gun* in her dresser!"

Lyle unclasped his hands and sat up straight, palming his thighs rigidly. "I got a letter the day before yesterday," he said. He was trying to sound brisk and businesslike, but he sounded frightened. "She said she wanted to see me. She was driving you to New Haven and she wanted me to come up and meet her at the station after you left. Tonight. She wanted to give me a chance to explain. She told me—" his voice wavered—"she told me not to tell anyone where I was going because it might get back to you somehow and you might call off your trip."

Melton put his hands to his face and rubbed his eyelids with his fingertips. "Oh Lord," he said, "can you conceive of her plotting, planning . . ." He stood up and turned his chair back under the writing table. "It's my fault," he said. "I never should have let her talk me into taking the trip." He turned to the window and stared out into a gray courtyard. "Did she ever tell you about the gypsies?"

"Gypsies?"

"Eight, no, ten years ago. My wife was alive then. We went to South America for a couple of months. You would think you could leave a girl of twenty-three alone for two months, wouldn't you? With a houseful of servants? Well, we came back to find the servants gone—she'd paid them off and given them a holiday—and the house full of gypsies. Gypsies! She'd invited them in for tea, like a girl in a fairy tale." He shook his head dolefully. "There were two goats in the garage."

"Gypsies," Lyle said, smiling thinly.

"There are some people," Melton said, "who grow up without ever attaining a firm grasp on reality."

They fell silent for a moment.

"What are you going to do?" Lyle asked.

"I'm not sure," Melton said. "My trip is cancelled, of course. I'll tell her that there's been some trouble with my passport or something. I'd like to avoid humiliating her, manage somehow to smooth over this entire situation without ever letting her know I'm aware of its existence. I'll talk to her, tell her I can see she's still brooding about you. If I can make her realize you're best forgotten . . ."

Lyle said softly, "Good Lord, she actually wants to kill me . . ." He stretched out on the bed again.

"Good Lord," he said wonderingly. There was a faint, flattered smile about his lips. It lingered for a moment, then dissolved, his eyes growing thoughtful. He glanced at Melton's back.

"What if you can't?" he said. He was speaking more slowly now. "What if you can't make her see the light? Suppose she takes her gun and comes after me. Don't you think it would be a good idea if I moved to a different hotel?"

"Yes," Melton said, "I suppose it would."

"The only trouble is," Lyle said, "I can't afford to move to a different hotel."

Melton turned from the window.

"I would even leave New York," Lyle said, "if I could afford to. Then you wouldn't have *any* worries about Sylvia getting herself into trouble."

Melton looked at him.

"Where would you go?" he said.

Lyle pondered.

"Dallas," he said. "Dallas, Texas." He thought for a moment. "Or is Houston the big city there? Oh well, Dallas or Houston."

Impassively Melton took out his wallet. Behind the bills he always kept a blank check.

Locked in the crawling traffic of the West Side Highway, Melton considered how best to temper Sylvia from her intended violence without revealing his own knowledge of it. He turned off onto the Merritt Parkway and as he did so he remembered that he had not eaten since breakfast. He stopped at a restaurant, ordered mechanically and ate without interest.

It was past seven o'clock when he guided the Lincoln between the stone posts and up the circular drive towards the front of the house. The Reddens' Plymouth was parked there, with Mrs. Redden in the act of pushing down the lid of the luggage compartment. Melton pulled up behind her and got out of the car.

"Good evening, sir," Mrs. Redden said a bit uncomfortably. "There's some dinner keeping warm on the stove."

"I ate on the road," Melton said.

Mrs. Redden brightened. "We offered to stay on till tomorrow, but Miss Sylvia insisted we shouldn't."

"Where is she?"

"Playing the piano."

Melton went up the steps and to the front door, stopping short as Redden came out with two umbrellas on his arm. "Oh, good evening," Redden said cheerfully. "I finished your packing and brought the suitcases down. There are two telegrams in your room."

"I . . . thanks." Melton caught the door, interrupting its slow swing closed.

"*Bon voyage*," Redden said.

"Yes, *bon voyage!*" Mrs. Redden called from the car.

"Thanks. Have a good trip." Melton stepped into the house and pulled the door shut after him. He

heard Mrs. Redden call out something about Italian food.

His three aluminum suitcases, tagged and labeled, were lined up in a corner of the hall. He looked at them blankly. From the rear of the house came the skipping notes of *The Spinning Song*. Sylvia had been given lessons as a child, but *The Spinning Song* was the only piece she remembered now. She played it rarely and not well. Melton went to the stairs. He listened as he climbed, thinking of all the lessons and practicing that had gone to produce this one awkwardly played selection, and thinking, beneath that, of what he would say to Sylvia.

He went into his room and found the two telegrams. They were from friends, wishing him a safe flight and a pleasant stay on the Riviera. He tossed them on the bed and went into the bathroom.

When he had washed up he came down the stairs again. The piano was silent now. "Sylvia?" he called.

There was no answer. He went into the living room and through it to the music room. She was not there. He returned to the hallway and called her name up the stairs, thinking that perhaps she had gone into her bedroom while he was in the bathroom, but the only answer was silence.

She was in her garden, of course. Melton went down the hall, through the pantry, and into the kitchen. He opened the back door. The sun had gone from the sky and the first blue of dusk was falling. Melton peered across the expanse of lawn, searching for movement behind the high shrubbery that fronted the garden. He moved forward. How like Sylvia, he thought — a walled garden . . . Birds were calling from the woods beyond. Melton was halfway across the lawn when there was a flutter of movement in the shrubbery and Sylvia came out. She was wearing her gardening smock.

"Sylvia," Melton called.

She gave a little jump. "Oh, hello," she said, smiling. Her glasses were askew and as Melton drew nearer he saw drops of perspiration on her white forehead.

"Working hard?" he said.

"I was beginning to worry. You're late, aren't you? The Reddens have left already."

"I know."

She looked at his jacket. "You're going to change, aren't you?"

"No rush," Melton said. He went over to a wooden bench built around the trunk of an old oak and sat down.

Sylvia followed and stood before him, looking at her watch. "It's twenty of eight," she said.

"I'm afraid the trip is postponed," Melton said.

"What?" She was staring at him.

"There's been some trouble with my passport."

"How could there be trouble with your passport? They renewed it. You showed it to me. How could there be trouble?"

He took her hands and drew her

gently to the seat beside him. "Well, as a matter of fact, there *hasn't* been trouble. It's because of you that I'm going to put it off."

"But you told everyone you're leaving!"

"So I'll call them tomorrow and tell them I'm not leaving."

"But why?" she said. "Why?"

"Because you're still brooding about Lyle," he said. "I can't leave you this way, Sylvia."

She managed a nervous laugh. "No," she said. "No, I'm not. Honestly I'm not."

"You are, Sylvia," he said. "You know you can't fool *me*."

Her gaze dropped to her lap.

"He's not worth it, Sylvia," Melton said. "Believe me, he's not worth brooding over, not worth hating, not even worth thinking about."

She looked up, suddenly smiling. She took his hand. "Come look at the flowers," she said childishly.

"All right, Sylvia."

They rose and went to the shrubbery and the narrow path that penetrated it. Sylvia parted the branches with her free hand, holding them as she went through so they wouldn't spring back at Melton.

Once on the other side she released his hand and moved forward quickly to a hill of earth at the far side of the garden. She pointed to the ground beside it. "Look!" she said proudly.

Melton came forward and looked. There was a large rectangular hole, very long and quite deep. In the bottom of it, inexplicably, lay Melton's three aluminum suitcases.

He looked at Sylvia wonderingly.

The gun was in her hand. She pushed a wisp of hair up off her forehead. "You ruined my life," she said softly.

Melton stared at her.

"You did," she said. "Ruined it. Thirty-three years. Snooping, spying, arranging things behind my back. Do you think I'm some kind of idiot who can't comb her own hair?" Tears welled up behind her glasses. "That's all there is, a person's life. And you ruined mine!"

"Sylvia . . ."

"Thirty-three years!" It was a scream, cords stretching in her throat. "But no more! Not the rest of it! He's coming back!" Tears were rolling down her flushed cheeks. "Lyle's coming back! Tonight! And he still loves me and this time you're not going to send him away!"

The gun in her hand spat brightness and shot a bolt of heat into Melton's chest. "Sylvia!" he cried.

Melton swayed, trying to speak, trying to tell her that Lyle was no good, that Lyle had been bought off, that Lyle wasn't . . . He stood swaying, staring at her, his hands to his wet chest, and for the first time in his life he saw that her eyes, which had always seemed a dull and empty blue, could burst on occasion to a vivid, gemlike intensity.

"Oh my God," he said, tumbling forward to the ground.

What's Your Verdict?

No. 10—The Murdered Divorce

BY SAM ROSS

WARREN STONE'S wife, Annabel, was a brass-blonde beauty with a breathtaking body, a girl who was out for all she could get as quickly as she could get it. That's why she'd married white-haired Warren in the first place: he had more money than anyone else in town, and he was an easy catch. Annabel lived happily with Warren's money and, on brief occasion, with Warren, until the night David Seaman came over to the Stone house to discuss contracts with Warren. It was love at first sight.

Neither Annabel nor David, who worked for a large, greedy and not particularly ethical corporation, was especially moral. It was simple to arrange meetings once or twice a week as long as contract negotiations between Stone's firm and David's kept up. Eventually, though, the contract was agreed on, drawn up and signed. There was no more reason for David to visit the Stone household, and meetings between him and Annabel became more difficult to arrange.

Things were still manageable for a while, though — until orders came through that David was to go to Pittsburgh to discuss another business deal. Pittsburgh was a long distance away. Annabel and David faced the prospect of immediate separation.

"I couldn't stand being away from you," Annabel told her lover as they said farewell. "I'll think of something. Maybe I can divorce Warren. I wouldn't mind, even though he is rich. I love you. And besides, he'll come across with a lot of alimony if I do divorce him."

"I'll think of something," David said. "Leave it to me."

From that point on things got complicated.

Annabel went home and, the very next night, broached the subject of divorce to Warren. At first he didn't like the idea at all, but Warren Stone was a realist. He could see that his wife was far from being in love with him. He could see that she would be less of a financial burden, once divorced and limited to a fixed monthly alimony, than she was while still his wife. And frankly, Warren Stone reminded himself, he was getting a little on in years. The

brass-blonde charms of his avaricious wife no longer attracted him as they once had.

After a week or so, therefore, he agreed to a divorce. He made two conditions. He wanted it quiet, and he wanted it quick. Both conditions were meant to insure against publicity. Warren Stone had a business empire to think of.

Annabel readily agreed and proceedings were opened.

Meantime, David had hit on another idea. In Pittsburgh, he frequented bars and cafes on the wrong side of the tracks and felt his way cautiously around until he'd made contact with a man who was willing to travel to the Stones' home town with no luggage but a gun. This man was to shoot Warren Stone and make it look like the act of a burglar surprised while rifling the wall-safe. David paid him half the agreed price before the man started his trip. The other half was to be paid on his victorious return.

The divorce, to Annabel's satisfaction, whipped through the courts. It was late on a Friday afternoon when the final decision was handed down, to be recorded first thing Monday morning, since the clerk of the court had already shut up shop. Annabel and Warren went home, climbed into their separate beds and dropped off to sleep.

Later that night the man from Pittsburgh arrived. He found the wall-safe and blasted it open, bringing Warren Stone out of his bed upstairs. Stone came charging down the stairs gun in hand.

The man fired once and caught Stone in the chest. Dying, Stone squeezed the trigger of his own gun. The recoil knocked him flat on his back. He never knew it; he was dead by the time his head hit the floor. But his shot had killed the man from Pittsburgh.

Annabel found the bodies.

The will was probated and read early Monday morning. Warren Stone had drawn it up himself, and one clause was rather odd:

"That my wife, Annabel Wilkins Stone, inherit my entire fortune of whatever amount and comprised in whatever items, if she be still my wife, so long as she remain unmarried after my decease; but that if she be my wife at the time of my decease, and afterward marry again, the whole of my fortune be diverted to other bequests, as hereunder described."

In brief, that meant that Annabel would be penniless as soon as she married David. So long as she was Stone's wife at the time of his death, the will applied.

"But I wasn't his wife when he died," she objected. "We'd gotten a divorce that day."

The records were checked. The divorce hadn't been entered.

"Ask the judge," Annabel said.

The judge was queried and backed up Annabel's story. David, back from Pittsburgh for a brief time,

was puzzled, since he'd known nothing about the divorce. Annabel was just as puzzled by David's disclosure of the murder plan. That had gone on the books as attempted burglary and murder, and the corpse of the man from Pittsburgh had been declared guilty of both charges.

But both David and Annabel were agreed on one point. There had been a divorce, so Annabel would inherit.

"But it isn't in the records," Stone's lawyer said. "Therefore, it doesn't exist in law."

"Testimony of a judge ought to be evidence enough for you," Annabel told him.

"Sure," David said. "Everybody knows there really was a divorce. Recording the fact is just form."

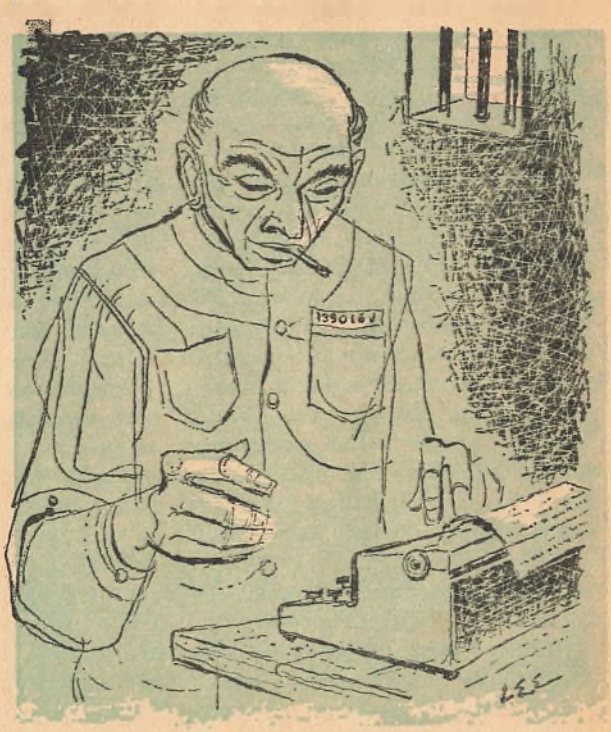
Who was right?

What's *your* verdict?

ANSWER:

Stone's lawyer was right. An unrecorded divorce is no divorce at all, according to a recent decision. Annabel was legally married to Warren Stone at the time of his death — and, therefore, as soon as she married David she forfeited all right to Warren's money. When Annabel found this out, she blurted out a few words, in rage, which made the police suspicious of Warren's death. The investigation of Warren's murder was reopened, and since Annabel had pointed the way with her rage-incited words, it didn't take long to catch, and to convict, David Seaman.

The Impostors



The woman said she was his wife. So, of course, he had to kill her.

BY JONATHAN CRAIG

I AM sixty-one years of age, and these are the last pages I will ever write. They have furnished me with a portable typewriter and a supply of paper. They call it occupational therapy and the new psychiatrist on the staff, Doctor Koebler, says it may help me to re-establish my former identity. I was a drama critic, you see. But Doctor Koebler is wrong. Well-meaning, I am sure, but quite wrong. He errs in his conception of my problem. It is not a question of re-establishment; it is a question of recapture. There is a

vast difference. My identity was not simply misplaced, as Doctor Koebler seems to believe; it was stolen from me. I shall regain it, of course, just as I helped Diane regain hers.

My case file is already quite voluminous. I have been examined by a long parade of doctors and each has made his own, and often lengthy, report. I would like to add my own statement to the record.

Here, as clearly as I can present them, are the facts. I killed my wife because she had grown ugly. I have spent my entire adult life in the world of art and music and the theater: I cannot bear ugly things. Disharmony of color and sound and form and texture offend me utterly. The careless reading of a passage from a symphony, the careless execution of a brush stroke, upsets me for days. And the vulgar presentation of the female body as practiced by most of our contemporary "painters" seems to me an insult to all but the most hopelessly philistine.

Imagine, then, my emotions one morning last month when I awoke and realized that my wife's once lovely face had, overnight, become grotesque with age and her perfect body had thickened to a gross, wholly undefined mass of sagging flesh. She was returning from her morning shower, quite *au naturel*, and apparently with no idea whatever of what had happened to her. She was fifty-four.

I lay on the bed for some moments, not trusting myself to speak until the mingled feelings of shock and disgust and nausea subsided. I knew, of course, what had transpired. Some impostor had swallowed my wife's identity, cloaked her youth and beauty in age and ugliness. And I, who had never thought of another woman since the day of our marriage twenty-five years before — I could not bear to look at her. I turned my face to the wall and feigned sleep. But I had not sufficiently masked my first expressions of shock and disgust. Diane seated herself on the side of the bed, peering at me curiously. After several moments she asked me what was wrong.

I had never dissembled with my wife, and I told her. I did not want to look at her face, but I forced myself to do so. She had once been one of our more acclaimed actresses, and so it was not difficult for her to pretend at first surprise and then a certain degree of bewilderment. She told me she looked no different from the way she had the night before, and when I objected to her attempt to joke about a matter so serious, she pretended to be both concerned and a little frightened. She left the room hurriedly and a short time later I heard the sound of the telephone dial, and then the occasional word and phrase that indicated she was calling our family physician.

But no doctor could remedy what had happened to her. No doctor could restore her lost beauty. No

doctor could remove that obese, formless body and return to Diane her own firm body with its tiny waist and long-legged loveliness. No doctor would realize that the monster he was treating was in reality an impostor, an unspeakable creature who had taken Diane's true identity, in all its freshness and beauty, and swallowed it, much as a priceless jewel might be swallowed by a toad.

But I saw this clearly, and I knew there was a ridiculously simple solution. What I must do, of course, was kill the impostor — and then Diane, the real Diane, would be released.

It was then I got out of bed and went into the kitchen for the butcher knife.

As I turned away from the shapeless mound of flesh at my feet I suddenly caught sight of the reflection in the mirror over the fireplace. The reflection of the second impostor, the one who had stolen *my* identity. The bald and wrinkled monster who had swallowed me just as Diane's monster had swallowed her.

I raised the knife and pressed the edge against my throat, gathering my strength for the final act that would free my identity, as Diane's had been freed. But I delayed too long. The hall door had not been locked, and it was only when the room began to fill with people that I remembered Diane's impostor had screamed and realized that the sound must have brought the neighbors.

This, as I said, happened last month. Doctor Koebler and the others have successfully prevented the recapture of my identity. They have taken away everything that might be used to kill him.

Except the typewriter ribbon. Doubled on itself a few times, it will provide a quite adequate rope with which to hang the impostor from the bars of my window. Doctor Koebler will not understand. He will call it suicide.

Diane is here with me, of course. She is looking at me a bit reproachfully, impatient no doubt for me to free my identity. She is anxious for us both to be as we once were, before the aged and ugly impostors came.

I must end this statement and prepare my rope.

Diane is far too lovely a girl to be kept waiting.

MUGGED AND PRINTED

REX STOUT, creator of Nero Wolfe, has been one of the best-known figures in the detective field ever since the publication of his first Wolfe novel, *Fer-De-Lance*, over twenty years ago. Since that date, Stout has written many other books, featuring Wolfe, Tecumseh Fox, or Alphabet Hicks, who makes his debut this issue in Stout's *His Own Hand*. Stout is one of the few detective writers ever to be profiled by the exclusive *New Yorker* magazine, and is President of the Authors' League of America. His latest book, *The Black Mountain*, has just been published to the accompaniment of critical raves — as usual.

IRA LEVIN is the author of *A Kiss Before Dying*, a detective novel which created a sensation when it appeared last year. It was serialized in *Cosmopolitan*, appeared as a hard-cover book and a pocket book, and has been sold to the movies for an A-budget picture. The book received the award of the Mystery Writers of America for the best first mystery of the year, and is still selling all over the country. Levin, who's now twenty-four years old, is working on a second book during furloughs from his Army service, and between chapters he turns out such fine stories as *Sylvia*, in this issue.

GEORGE BAGBY's face may look familiar to sharp-eyed *Manhunt* readers. *Mug Shot*, in this issue, is Bagby's *Manhunt* debut, but he also made a debut, as Hampton Stone, a few issues back. Both Bagby and Stone are in reality Aaron Marc Stein, one of the most prolific and well-liked writers in the field. Bagby is the creator of Inspector Schmidt, the footsore and knowledgeable police Inspector whose adventures have been chronicled in such books as *Drop Dead* and the recent *Dead Drunk*.

SAM S. TAYLOR is the creator of Neal Cotten, the private detective who makes his magazine debut in this issue's *The General Slept Here*. Cotten is the private detective featured in those insomniac novels, *Sleep No More* and *No Head For Her Pillow* and the latest, *So Cold My Bed*. Taylor's preoccupation with insomnia is reasonable, because you won't be able to put down his latest novelette until you've finished it, no matter how late it gets! We'll be bringing you more of Taylor's fine work soon.

HAL ELLSON's latest novelette, *Blood Brothers*, is another tough yarn in the tradition of Ellson's best-selling *Duke* and other books. ◆ EDWARD D. RADIN, continuing his new series of true-crime features for *Manhunt* with *The Meek Monster*, has come up with one of the most unusual cases we've ever seen. ◆ JONATHAN CRAIG, creator of *Manhunt's* Police File series, will be back with another documentary soon. Meanwhile, read his different and startling *The Impostors*. ◆ BRYCE WALTON, whose *The Movers* appears in this issue, is the famous author of many hundreds of stories and TV scripts. We'll be bringing you more of Walton's own brand of suspense and realism soon.

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Mason's client is accused of stealing $40,000 in jewels. Then they accuse her of *MURDER!* Perry must save her from the chair—though he suspects she may be GUILTY!

2 THE CASE OF THE
RUNAWAY CORPSE

Myrna Davenport hires Mason to get a letter accusing her of planning to poison her husband Ed. All Perry finds is — *blank* paper! The police say Perry hid the REAL letter!

3 THE CASE OF [illegible]
FUGITIVE [illegible]E

Perry sneaks int[illegible] art-ment; finds an e[illegible] afe. Then a blonde sla[illegible] *the safe shut.* Not siniste[illegible] *except* that the *tenan*[illegible]d been MURDERED!

4 THE CAS[illegible] OF T[illegible]
GREEN-EYED [illegible]ISTER

Grogan, a blackmailer, wants $2[illegible] 000 for a piece evidence agai[illegible] Fritch. Then Fri[illegible]ch is found DE[illegible]! Grogan has an alibi—but not Ma[illegible]on!

5 THE CASE OF [illegible]
HESITANT HO[illegible]S

The *first* woman says she saw Perry's client at *the scene of the crime.* The *second* should not have appeared—but did. The *third*—Perry's star witness — *disappeared completely!*

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